

Desistance in Transition: From Prison to Probation Supervision



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Abstract

Although nearly everyone incarcerated in prison is eventually released into society, prison studies and research on desistance from crime are usually seen as two separate fields within criminology. In the British context, there has been limited scholarly attention given to the connection between individuals' experiences of imprisonment and their post-release outcomes. This thesis bridges these two areas by examining the resettlement experiences of a small group of men and women moving from open prisons into the community. It explores how structural factors – particularly employment opportunities and family ties – intersect with individual factors, such as identity construction, in the process of desisting from crime.

This study aims to understand the relationship between imprisonment and post-release outcomes by analysing the resettlement and desistance experiences of men and women. By bringing these topics together, it conceptualises desistance as a dynamic and non-linear process shaped by multiple, concurrent transitions that occur both during incarceration and after release, as individuals strive to distance themselves from crime and move towards societal integration.

Drawing on qualitative interviews, the analysis focuses on three key transitional phases in individuals' lives: the period immediately preceding release from prison, the immediate post-release stage, and the stage approximately eight months after release. These phases form the empirical components of this dissertation.

The thesis is organised around four main empirical chapters. Chapter 4 analyses the relationship between prison work and post-release outcomes. Chapter 5 examines the challenges of resettlement under probation supervision. Chapter 6 conceptualises desistance as a transitional process initiated during imprisonment and maintained after release. Chapter 7 considers how individuals achieved their goals, marking a new start in their lives. The concluding chapter reaffirms the need for resettlement and desistance efforts to foster compassion and support rather than risk surveillance.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Mohammed was raised in London during the early 1980s. His parents passed away when he was 12 years old, while his two older brothers were in prison. He had no rules or boundaries to guide him growing up. Mohammed's transition into adulthood was challenging without school attendance or formal qualifications. With limited support structures, he turned to the streets for shelter. He struggled to obtain necessities like food and clothes, and lacked the financial stability to accommodate his needs. Eventually, he began to offend to acquire what he needed. At 15 years old, Mohammed was charged with his first offence and was sent to Feltham Young Offenders Institution to serve a 3-year sentence. When he left prison after eight months, Mohammed's deprivations intensified. Between the ages of 17 and 19, Mohammed started to commit serious crimes. At 19, he was sentenced to 12 years by the same judge. When I interviewed Mohammed in prison, he recalled the judge's words during his sentencing: 'I checked my files, and I sentenced you when you were 15. Now you're 19, and you've upped your game from street robberies to armed robberies. So, you didn't learn anything from when I sent you to jail for three years'.

Throughout his 12-year sentence, Mohammed experienced life behind bars across 18 prison establishments. Released after nine years, at 28 years old, Mohammed was recalled to prison for breaching his licence conditions. He was released in 2010 and met his future wife in the same year. They were engaged a year later and decided to get married in 2013. That year, Mohammed received a new criminal sentence, this time for 17 years. In his words: 'I was lucky to get 17 years. I should have got a life sentence'. Mohammed spent the next five years in a

high-security men's prison. He was transferred to a medium-security prison and then to an open prison (HMP Spring Hill) to serve the last seven months of his sentence. Throughout his life, Mohammed had spent more time inside than outside prison.

When I met him at HMP Spring Hill, Mohammed was learning how to manage greater freedom. For the first time, he was eligible for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to rebuild ties with his wife. When I interviewed Mohammed just before he was released from Spring Hill, I asked him what he was most worried about and what he was most looking forward to. Mohammed was anxious about the possibility of being recalled to prison, which would exert further strain on his wife. He was excited to start his new job in the energy sector, which he had secured through his social contacts rather than through prison or the Probation Service. He insisted he would not return to the 'revolving door of the prison'. He said, 'I am old enough to know I am not giving them any more of my life. This time I won't be that person'.

Rebecca was born in the South East of England in the early 1960s. She is the middle child with two brothers. She went to a girl's school but spent much of her time at home due to the cost of travel to school. Rebecca was introduced to her husband by her father while she was in secondary school. She dropped out of her last year of school due to pregnancy. At the age of 16, Rebecca was married with one child and had no formal education. She moved into her first two-bedroom flat at 17 years old. She then went on to have three more children by the time she was 26, before getting divorced ten years later.

Growing up, Rebecca believed she was living in a caring environment. Only later did she understand that she came from a dysfunctional family. Sexually

abused by her two uncles and father from the age of 5, Rebecca suffered an extremely traumatic and coercive past. Following her divorce, Rebecca met another man with whom she happily married for 20 years. Events turned in 2020 when Rebecca was charged with a sexual offence and was sentenced to prison for three years, of which she would serve 18 months inside prison. This was her first sentence at the age of 58. Implicated by family troubles from her past, Rebecca claims she should never have been incarcerated and maintains her innocence.

Rebecca spent the first eight months of her sentence in a closed prison and was transferred to an open prison (HMP East Sutton Park) to serve the remaining ten months. As with many first-time prisoners, she found her imprisonment to be overwhelming. After several months of adapting to prison life, Rebecca was diagnosed with cancer. While being treated, Rebecca discovered art and decided to turn the burdens and frustrations of imprisonment into opportunities for self-development and growth. In her words: 'I would not have been the woman that I am today without 18 months spent in prison. Coming to prison has made me a stronger person'. Before her release, I asked Rebecca the same questions I had posed to Mohammed. She was worried about the stigma of the 'ex-offender' label and how long it would take for this feeling to disappear. At the same time, she was excited about having the confidence to be independent, learning to live with her partner again, and continuing to produce her artwork. Like many people leaving prison, Rebecca wanted to live freely again and restore a sense of normality.

I. Research Framework

Rebecca and Mohammed are two of the 6,424¹ people imprisoned in Category D open prisons in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2023a). Open prisons are classified as the lowest level of security across the prison estate. These prisons allow individuals risk-assessed as suitable to undertake work and educational activities for most of the day as part of their resettlement² and sentencing plans. Such rehabilitative aspirations are emblazoned outside the prison gates of each establishment: ‘HMP Spring Hill: A resettlement prison’ and ‘Welcome to East Sutton Park: Pathways to community resettlement’. Mohammed and Rebecca form part of a significant change in the British prison population.

In England and Wales, 86,803 people are incarcerated (Ministry of Justice, 2024a). This number has steadily increased over the past decade. The Ministry of Justice projects that 97,500 individuals will be incarcerated by July 2025. Of the total prison population, 7% reside in open conditions. Women comprise less than 5% of the prison population. This proportion has remained consistent over the last five years (House of Commons, 2022). While the number of female prisoners has steadily declined over the past 20 years, the Ministry of Justice predicts an increase to an additional 38% by September 2026 due to the government’s commitment to ‘recruit an extra 20,000 police officers, which is likely to increase charge volumes’ (Ministry of Justice, 2020a: 1). Currently, 61% of the prison population is serving determinate sentences, which is predicted to reach 65% by September 2026 (Ministry of Justice, 2020a). People in open conditions serve determinate

¹ This figure includes prisoners in the Category B prison, HMP Grendon, which is located next to HMP Spring Hill. At the time of data collection, one governor jointly manages these two prisons, and statistics are often combined in official publications.

² The operational definition of resettlement is used in this thesis. The Ministry of Justice defines ‘resettlement’ as ‘covering all aspects of preparing people in prison for their release back into the community and helping to reduce their likelihood of reoffending’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2022a: 4).

sentences, and the majority are released back into society. They spend the first half of their sentence inside prison and serve the second half in the community under the supervision of the Probation Service.

The number of prisoners being transferred into open conditions is steadily rising. As part of the Ministry of Justice's plans to stabilise the prison population, the Restricted Open Estate Transfer (ROET) scheme was introduced in September 2023 to redistribute prisoners serving a standard determinate sentence with an automatic release at the halfway point. Partly to manage operational and fiscal concerns over prison crowding, the open estate is set to experience an inevitable surge in the number of individuals it contains.

Once released, prisoners must comply with the conditions set out in their licence or risk being recalled to prison. On average, 30% of people are recalled to prison while serving their sentence in the community and 'four in ten of these within 28 days of release' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023: 4). The main reason people are recalled to custody is that they breach their licence conditions, often resulting from 'homelessness, relapse into substance misuse, and a lack of continuity of care between pre- and post-release service provision' (ibid). In addition to the standard licence conditions that apply to all individuals released from determinate sentences³, the Licence Conditions Policy Framework (2024) may enforce individual conditions to the licence where staff consider it 'proportionate, reasonable and necessary' (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a: 6). Breaches of these types of conditions may include committing another offence or visiting an 'exclusion zone' where an individual has been restricted from

³ A full list of licence conditions can be found in the Licence Conditions Policy Framework (2024): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/632c83888fa8f51d21dbbef4/licence-conditions-pf.pdf>

entering specified geographical boundaries during their licence period (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a). Depending on the severity of the breach, prisoners are most often expected to serve the remainder of their sentence in custody and work towards being re-categorised to an open prison. The parole board determines whether to re-release the person.

Our understanding of open prisons and the experiences of those living in them remains limited. We also have little knowledge of what happens to individuals like Rebecca and Mohammed once they are released back into the community. To develop my understanding of a prisoner's journey from prison to society, I turned to the literature on desistance. In its simplest form, 'the desistance framework is a theoretical paradigm that seeks to explain the process leading up to the cessation of offending behaviour' (Kazemian, 2020: 6). It examines the change process, emphasising the individual as the agent of change rather than relying solely on interventions or expert treatments.

Today, desistance is widely applied in criminal justice policy and practice, and it is integrated into national reporting and government decision-making. In the United Kingdom, a crucial distinction exists between 'what works' and desistance research. The former focuses on interventions aimed at reducing reoffending, while the latter examines the individual to understand various factors that contribute to abstaining from crime (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2019). Despite this difference, desistance continues to be implemented within an 'evidence-based' framework, mainly concerned with the effectiveness of programmes and interventions that may encourage a departure from criminal behaviour. Strangely, desistance as a framework is absent from the range of operational policy frameworks for prison and probation (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2018).

Instead, it is referenced under ‘offending behaviour programmes and interventions’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2022b), available for prisoners in England and Wales.

Understanding how and why people change can help us tailor support mechanisms that complement that process. To understand the potential for desistance, we should think beyond the ‘what works’ paradigm and connect empirical studies to the broader canon of criminological literature. I begin exploring desistance from the perspective of individuals who are in the process of undertaking it, rather than focusing on recidivism measures and risk-based interventions. By connecting the benefits and impacts to the wider desistance and criminological frameworks, this research illustrates how abstinence from crime and integration into society are made possible. As the participants’ testimonies reveal in this thesis, desistance is not a criminal justice policy or programme per se, but rather, as Graham and McNeill (2017: 445) aptly state, ‘a process that belongs to the desisters themselves’. This study, therefore, aligns with McNeill et al.’s. (2009) call for social scientists to tackle the ‘analytical lacuna’ resulting from over-reliance on accounts of resettlement driven by interventionist and policy perspectives. We can gain a deeper understanding of how and why desistance occurs by examining it subjectively and qualitatively.

II. This Thesis

This thesis examines the ‘lived experiences’ of a small group of men and women moving from imprisonment into the community. Often, this phrase refers to people’s firsthand testimonies. Their ‘lived experience’ is seen as an authentic form of knowledge grounded in their everyday lives. However, I adopt a more

philosophical perspective, drawing on Gadamer, who defines lived experiences as those that have made ‘a special impression that [gave them] lasting importance’ (Gadamer, 2004: 53). For Gadamer, lived experience is a type of knowledge acquired from the world that holds particular significance for a person’s narrative or sense of self, rather than merely a descriptive account. The interpretations individuals assign to these experiences help them understand and give meaning to their lives (see also Frechette et al., 2020). Understanding these experiences and their meanings is a central aim of this research.

Even though nearly everyone in prison is eventually released, prison studies and desistance research are usually considered in two distinct fields in criminology (Carlen, 1983; Crewe, 2011a; Liebling, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2004; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011; Sparks et al., 1996; Sykes, 1958). Scholars have paid limited attention to the relationship between people’s experiences of incarceration and their post-release outcomes (although see Segrave and Carlton, 2013). Such oversight is curious and speaks more to the industry of academic knowledge than to the realities of the criminal justice system.

Here, in contrast, I connect people’s accounts of imprisonment with desistance to examine the range of factors that influenced their decision to abstain from crime. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 individuals, I focus on three key transitional phases in their lives: the period immediately before release from prison, the immediate post-release phase, and the stage roughly eight months after release. Aiming to understand how the experiences of imprisonment intersect with post-release outcomes, there are two core research aims at the centre of this dissertation:

- 1) To develop an understanding of the relationship between aspects of prison life (e.g., employment and identity construction) and post-imprisonment outcomes; and
- 2) To analyse the lived experiences of resettlement and desistance for men and women.

The empirical chapters are broadly split into two parts to address the research aims. In the first part, I conducted interviews with individuals nearing release from two Category D open prisons in England. These prisons serve as a site for gathering participants and understanding their experiences of imprisonment as they unfolded. The second part of the thesis occurs in various community settings across England. It examines post-release outcomes with the same group of people serving the second half of their sentences on licence while under probation supervision. Interviews with participants in the community form the main focus of this research. Indeed, since no study has specifically explored the experiences of desistance for men and women transitioning from open prisons to the community, observing the same group of people at different stages of their resettlement journey provided a valuable starting point for understanding the link between imprisonment and post-release outcomes.

III. Thesis Outline

My thesis is divided into two broad sections: the first is theoretical, and the second is empirical. Connecting these two halves, I discuss the research methodology I employed. The thesis is organised into eight chapters, including this introduction and a conclusion.

Following this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework for the study (Chapter 2) and the relevant literature on prison and desistance. There, I focus on

three themes most pertinent to my research: employment, family ties, and identity construction. While much scholarship has focused on what happens after a criminal sentence ends, the literature, as well as my study, makes it clear that the experience of giving up crime begins in prison (Cleere, 2021; Kazemian, 2020). This form of pre-desistance influences post-release outcomes and directs our attention to the role of penal practitioners who play an integral part in the resettlement process. The literature review concludes the theoretical foundations of the dissertation, providing a critical lens through which to analyse the lived experiences of male and female prisoners.

The next chapter outlines the methodology and research methods I employed in my thesis (Chapter 3) and explains my choice to undertake a qualitative study of desistance. The methodological framework addresses the call for more prospective research into the post-release context (Rodermond, 2016), considering the challenging circumstances faced by many formerly incarcerated men and women.

The following four chapters present empirical evidence and draw extensively on my interview material. Chapter 4 analyses men's and women's work experiences in two open prisons and their accounts of how these experiences shaped their post-release outcomes. We know very little about the transitional experiences of people once they are released from prison. Do they typically remain in the same job after leaving prison? What is the relationship between their prison work and what happens to them when they are released? The chapter addresses some of these gaps in our understanding of how open prison regimes support post-release employment aspirations and the extent to which they prepare individuals for a smooth transition into the community. It concludes with a discussion of the

implications of the relationship between prison work and post-release outcomes within the broader resettlement context for men and women moving from prison to society.

Chapter 5 explores the challenges of resettlement for people transitioning into the community and their experiences of serving the second half of their sentence on licence. I argue that although probation supervision aims to support resettlement, it also hinders essential post-release needs for individuals trying to re-establish their place in society. I illustrate, for example, how licence conditions have led individuals to make significant adjustments to their lives to regain a sense of normality. In the final section of the chapter, I use housing provision as a case study to highlight the limited transitional support available, which can leave men and women in more vulnerable positions than when they first entered prison, including homelessness. This situation exacerbates pre-existing disadvantages and social exclusion. I demonstrate the shortcomings of housing provision in meeting the basic needs of prisoners who most require support to integrate into society.

In the third empirical chapter, I conceptualise experiences within open prisons as a form of ‘pre-desistance’ that influences men’s and women’s integration into society (Chapter 6). To develop this argument, I ask a series of questions that form the core of this research: How do elements of imprisonment, such as identity reconstruction and family ties, affect the desistance process? Are these processes similar for men and women? I explore the motivating factors behind people’s abstinence from crime, with a particular focus on family ties and identity reconstruction. I emphasise how these themes are mutually reinforcing, interconnected, and essential to the desistance process. I demonstrate how narratives of self-reflection act as crucial modes of identity reconstruction. I

conclude the chapter by discussing how reframing desistance as a transitional process can begin during imprisonment and be sustained after release.

The final empirical chapter demonstrates how participants reached their goals and aspirations (Chapter 7). In doing so, it highlights the motivations and differences between men's and women's aspirations, as well as the factors driving them. I describe how factors related to desistance and future goals are closely intertwined. In the second part of the chapter, I explain how a consistent progression in achieving goals signifies a new beginning in participants' lives.

I conclude the thesis by emphasising the importance of the research findings and their implications for future scholarship on desistance and resettlement. I contextualise the findings within the framework of neoliberal-informed penal politics, demonstrating how neoliberal tendencies influence prison and probation practices and how men and women aspire to become successful individuals. I demonstrate how individuals can experience positive growth during incarceration and maintain positive outcomes after release, despite facing challenging circumstances. The final call of this thesis is to situate penalty within a regime that centres on the individual in resettlement and desistance efforts, fostering compassion and support rather than responsibility and risk management.

Chapter 2

Theorising Desistance

To understand life after prison, it is essential to read the literature on desistance. There, scholars tend to concentrate on two distinct lines of analysis: structural factors that can influence a person's pathway to becoming a law-abiding citizen (Farrall et al., 2010; 2014; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Sampson et al., 2006; Vaughan, 2007) and the role of identity construction and human agency in explaining individual motivations and differences in efforts to desist (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Most of these studies are set in the post-release context and focus on retrospective accounts of how men abstain from crime. However, less research has examined the early stages of desistance, a crucial period in a person's transition from prison to society. This initial phase often determines whether an individual will revert to a life of crime or transition to a law-abiding life, making it an essential area for further investigation (King, 2013b).

As this chapter will demonstrate, studies have found desistance to be a process shaped by a sequence of interconnected events rather than a single transition (Farrall et al., 2011; LeBel et al., 2008). Penal research should pay close attention to the relationship between imprisonment and post-release outcomes to improve our understanding of desistance. Analysing why people abstain from crime requires considering a broad set of mutually reinforcing factors. This integrated approach provides a more nuanced and empirically rich picture of people's lives, from the time they first enter custody to their release back into society.

As this thesis will demonstrate, at least among the people I interviewed, the

experience of ‘going straight’ (Maruna, 2001) cannot be explained solely by factors outside the prison, but is also shaped and revitalised through a transitional process during imprisonment. Like Maruna and colleagues, I argue that giving up offending is best understood as a process. Individuals often navigate transitional events to move away from crime and towards integration into society. I demonstrate that this individual change process initiates within prison as a form of pre-desistance and subsequently impacts post-release outcomes.

This chapter is divided into several parts. It begins with an overview of the socio-political context in which English prisons and probation services exist today. This background is important given the relationship between imprisonment and how it is situated within a broader societal context (Cavadino et al., 2013; Melossi, 2001). I then turn to the literature on prison sociology before introducing Category D open prisons and analysing the literature on the prisoner experience in open conditions. Following this, I outline the definitions of desistance and critically engage with their theoretical explanations and the empirical studies that inform them. Here, I pay particular attention to studies that conceptualise the relationship between structure and individual identity in the desistance process. I focus on three themes most relevant to my research: employment, family ties, and identity construction. I highlight that while individual and structural factors are essential to explaining desistance, we must also examine the role of penal practitioners, given that they play an integral part in shaping the resettlement process. This literature review will conclude the theoretical foundations of the dissertation, offering a critical lens through which to analyse the lived experiences of male and female prisoners.

I. Neoliberalism and Punishment

As an economic doctrine, neoliberalism gained prominence in Western liberal societies during the early 1970s. It was adopted in response to the fiscal and welfare crises of the Keynesian state. Neoliberalism contends that the government should be restricted from interfering with economic activity to eliminate barriers that constrain individual freedom. Echoing the neoclassical model, it adopts a laissez-faire capitalist ideology, characterised by the deregulation of economic relations, which became the dominant social policy paradigm during the Thatcherite period. This form of liberalism is often associated with early liberal scholars who advocated for free market policies with minimal government intervention in social and political matters (Reiner, 2007). Neoliberalism promotes individual responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative. As Harvey (2005: 65) explains, ‘each person is held accountable for their actions and well-being in the domain of the market’.

Unlike more protectionist and welfarist forms of government, neoliberalism aims to reorganise society by removing state regulation in favour of civil and economic freedom. Neoliberalism’s focus on the market as society’s organising principle and its principles of economic rationalism, responsabilisation, and efficiency foster the ‘encouragement of competitive individualism, consumer desire and instrumental egoism’ (Hall et al., 2008: 12).

Key figures in penology, such as David Garland (2001), Nicola Lacey (2008, 2010), Jonathan Simon (2007), and Bernard Harcourt (2009), have all concurred that the neoliberal social system within which contemporary British prisons operate has had a detrimental impact on penal matters. In his work, *Neoliberal Penalty*, Harcourt (2009) argues that criminal justice policy has led to

increased punishment. He suggests that ‘neoliberal penalty marginalises and pushes punishment to the outskirts of the market, unleashing the state on the carceral sphere’ (ibid: 3). This approach seeks to legitimise rationality outside political economy and reasserts the nexus of capitalist production ‘from above’, enforced by senior officials, high-ranking politicians, and state executives. Harcourt’s analysis explains that the growth rates of incarceration are synonymous with the naturalisation of government intervention in the penal sphere, while concurrently deriding government as ineffective in all other realms. By conceptualising the state’s role as governed by natural order, ‘the government is relegated to the boundary, and given free rein there - and there alone - to expand, intervene, and punish, often severely’ (ibid: 3). Reiner (2007) makes the shift in incentives for actors in a whole array of political and economic roles conspicuous, though with a particular material and symbolic emphasis on penalty as a form of social ordering and escalation of imprisonment.

The neoliberal agenda gained momentum in Britain during Tony Blair’s government. The ‘New Labour’ manifesto, a key document in this shift, incorporated significant elements of the neoliberal agenda. At the heart of this political rhetoric was a highly punitive ‘law and order’ approach (see Cavadino et al., 2013) that embodied a ‘tough on crime’ stance, reflecting the rising public demand for increased security (Brownlee, 1998; Coleman and Sim, 2005; Cotton, 2000). Consequently, stricter regimes grounded in financial and moral justifications were developed based on neoliberal principles of small government, meeting key performance indicators, entrepreneurialism, and the ostensibly morally neutral market (Harvey, 2005). A shift from focusing on ‘outcomes’ to

‘outputs’ highlighted ‘what the organisation did, rather than what, if anything, it achieved’ (Garland, 1996: 458, emphasis added).

Contemporary prisons differ from those described in earlier studies in several significant ways. In England and Wales, prisons are less overtly brutal and violent than their predecessors but arguably more psychologically intrusive (Crewe, 2011a). Prison sentences are longer, which is altering the demographic makeup of the prison population by incarcerating increasingly vulnerable individuals (Liebling, 2006) and leading to an ageing prison demographic. Technological advances mean prison walls are increasingly vulnerable to devices such as mobile phones, which offer access to wider society and the potential to alleviate some of the hardships of imprisonment.

Within twenty years, a new penal consensus has given way to a new set of appetites for criminal law administration underpinned by incapacitation, deterrence, and retribution as the fundamental justifications of punishment (Bottoms, 1995; Garland, 1990). A pivotal moment in this new penal sensibility was the conservative turn of the 1970s, which gave impetus to managerial strategies of actuarial justice and crime control. During this period, support for the rehabilitative ideal fell into disrepute as a shift occurred from individual-oriented theories of punishment to risk-based managerial discourses and practices. Such policy measures were geared towards an increased focus on technocratic and calculated governing systems (Bottoms, 1995; Cheliotis, 2006; Feeley and Simon, 1992; Garland, 1990).

In their conceptualisation of ‘the new penology’, Feeley and Simon (1992: 455) argue that such penal frameworks involve ‘identifying and managing unruly groups’. Greater emphasis is placed on punishment policies that aim to achieve

managerial goals (Garland, 2001). Systemic, coordinated processes are utilised as statistical machinery to regulate levels of probability and risk among numerous offenders efficiently (Cheliotis, 2006), rather than diagnosing their deviance and antisocial behaviour. In establishing this ‘custodial continuum’ - reminiscent of the Foucauldian ‘carceral archipelago’ (Foucault, 1977) - the system employs actuarial techniques that analyse prisoners ‘not as coherent subjects....but as members of particular sub-populations and the intersection of various categorical indicators’ (Feeley and Simon, 1994: 178). This view is in stark contrast to ‘old penology’, which centres on the rehabilitation of offenders, presenting crime as a clinical case in need of effective systems treatment and ‘to ascertain the nature of the responsibility of the accused and hold the guilty accountable’ (1994: 173). The emergence of this penological model is synonymous with the penal field’s ‘actuarial turn’ and ‘new managerialism’, both of which are closely associated with evidence-based penal reform, promising objectivity and efficiency in an era that prioritises transparency, reliability, consistency, and fiscal regulation.

In essence, what was once an organisation focused on social welfare intervention is now overshadowed by national political structures and their punitive tendencies. As Melossi (2001: 407) reminds us, ‘punishment is deeply embedded in the national and cultural specificity of the environment which produces it’. England and Wales are often cited as examples of typical neoliberal economies, characterised by higher levels of criminality and punitiveness compared to corporatist and social democratic nations across continental Europe (Cavadino et al., 2013). According to Bottoms (1980), such neoliberal penal logic contributed to the decline of the ‘rehabilitative ethic’. This decline was driven by a range of factors, including adverse research findings (Brody, 1976; Lipton et al., 1975),

financial concerns (Bottoms, 1995), rising crime rates, and disproportionate increases in victimisation fear (Bottomley and Pease, 1986).

However, rather than fully displacing rehabilitation as a penal priority, as Bottoms (1980) argued, contemporary rehabilitative practices are increasingly shaped by the demands of neoliberal socio-economic policies. Such perspectives have been supported by neoliberal scholars like Robert Reiner (2007), who note that neoliberal economies are characterised by conspicuous consumerism, which places great emphasis on competitive individualism. More importantly, this economic and labour market restructuring supports the neoliberal government's goal of enabling individuals to self-actualise through their labour. Government becomes desocialised to intensify the economic behaviour of the rational actor: 'Politics must actively intervene to create the organisational and subjective conditions for entrepreneurship' (Rose, 1999: 144). Consequently, neoliberalism presents individuals as ultimately responsible for their offending, rather than viewing criminality as a consequence of social, political, and economic structures.

Neoliberal penal discourses have not only shaped prison policies and practices but have also significantly influenced the Probation Service. There has been a noticeable shift in England and Wales from a 'relatively established narrative about prisoner resettlement within public probation services to a more complex and problematic array of services and practices' (McNeill and Graham, 2019: 368). This shift, mainly since the 2015 'Transforming Rehabilitation' agenda, has led to significant organisational changes and part-privatisation, as highlighted by Padfield (2019). The restructuring of post-imprisonment services and agencies providing resettlement support has altered the delivery of interventions and programmes both inside the prison and within the community.

While a variety of multi-agencies from the ‘penal voluntary sector’ (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016) exist to facilitate resettlement, they have contributed to ‘organisational bifurcation’ (Burke and Collett, 2016) amidst a serious and deepening ‘penal crisis’ and series of scandals (Moore and Hamilton, 2016; Taylor et al., 2017). Public sector initiatives support some of these community service providers.

In contrast, other initiatives are facilitated by private sector companies and sub-contracted third sector organisations through a ‘hybridised contractual service provision arrangement’ (McNeill and Graham, 2019: 368). This shift can be partly explained by the adoption of neoliberal discourses, which have contributed to the Probation Service since the privatisation of the criminal justice system. Against the backdrop of neoliberal-informed penal politics, probation supervision places the onus on the individual to self-rehabilitate and influence the terms of their sentencing. The shift away from state regulation of public services restructures the economy, allowing individuals to take responsibility for their actions and reinforcing the neoliberal impetus to be self-sufficient within the community. Part of the allure of the idea that desistance from crime is an individual choice is that it aligns with neoliberal ideologies.

Crewe (2011a) presents a similar argument in the context of prisons, suggesting that neoliberal strategies, what Garland (1997) terms ‘governmentality’, encourage prisoners to self-regulate behaviour with penal norms - engaging in purposeful activity, addressing their offending behaviour - or risk the consequences of ‘irresponsible behaviour’. The same logic can be applied in probation supervision, where individuals are responsible for carefully managing their licence conditions or face the risk of recall to prison. It is widely accepted that

neoliberalism has significantly influenced penal policy and practice.

While this study was driven by my interest in what happens to men and women after they leave prison, it quickly became apparent that what they experience inside prison profoundly impacts their outcomes after they are released. To better understand this aspect of the study, we must turn to the sociology of imprisonment.

II. The Sociology of Imprisonment

Prison sociologists tend to focus on the nature of life in prison (Crewe, 2020; Crewe et al., 2017; Liebling, 2004; Liebling et al., 2019; Sparks et al., 1996; Sykes, 1958; Wright et al., 2022). In much of that scholarship, the meaning or perception of punishment has generally been framed in terms of pain (Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Crewe, 2011a; Goffman, 1961; Sykes, 1958). According to Crewe (2011b), an elusive form of institutional power has ignited new psychological pains of imprisonment. Managers observing system targets maintain control. However, front-line prison officers can still influence life on the wings through ‘soft power’ by granting requests, ignoring misdemeanours, providing incentives and privileges, and ostensibly promoting compliance and self-governance. This ‘soft power’ encapsulates contemporary prison pains, which relate to a ‘broader and tighter grip on behaviour and cognition’ (Crewe, 2011b: 460), arbitrary application of rules, and the ‘psychological burden of imprisonment’ (Crewe, 2011a: 522). Incarceration thus remains a painful experience.

In prison sociology, issues of gender, for the most part, are still firmly sidelined to the periphery of criminological analyses (see Garland, 1990; Liebling, 2004). There are, however, a few notable exceptions (see Bosworth, 1996; 1999;

Chamberlen, 2016; 2018; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Howe, 1994). More recent analyses have aimed to remedy this unusual absence from studies of penology by centralising gender in their narratives (see, inter alia, Bosworth and Kaufman, 2012; Crewe et al., 2017; Rowe, 2016; Segrave and Carlton, 2013). However, as Bosworth and Kaufman (2012) importantly remind us, taking gender seriously involves much more than simply writing about women.

The ‘vantage point’ of a gendered analysis starts from the view that the intersections between gender, race, class, and sexuality are constitutive of ourselves and our individual experiences of the social world. These points of intersection are simultaneously unique subject positions that provide meaningful boundaries of identity. Through our complex identities, ‘we become both agents and subjects to the hierarchies of social order and histories of power’ (Bosworth and Kaufman, 2012: 31). This interplay between subjectivity and power relations recasts assumptions about the impact and experiences of punishment. Accounts of punishment which adopt gender theory as their model advance theoretical criminology in ways that go beyond simply ‘fleshing out’ our understanding of imprisonment. It further aims to build a more persuasive critique of penalty, one that champions a politics of recognition of our shared humanity (see, for example, Bosworth et al., 2005).

When writing about issues related to penal power, prison sociologists have primarily focused on concepts of domination and resistance. Most of this body of work tends to focus on men’s experiences. Research on women’s imprisonment, particularly their capacity to act, has tended to be treated primarily as resistance (Bosworth, 1999). In her ethnographic study, Rowe (2016) explored how women exercised agency to find ways of ‘doing time’ and alleviating the pains of

imprisonment (see also Giallombardo, 1966; Heffernan, 1972; Severance, 2005). She concluded that most accounts of women's incarceration have focused on how they 'cope with and through their relationships with one another but paid less attention to how they engage with regime structures and manifestations of penal power, or to practices not directly connected to 'pains' (Rowe, 2016: 346; see also Bosworth, 1999; Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2005; Lindberg, 2005).

Rowe (2016: 2) argues that, despite the disciplinary structures of power and authority, there is 'creativity, invention, generativity' within individuals as they 'engage in constant manipulation and rational decision making to turn events into opportunities'. Rowe argues that individuals can adapt to penal power without being reduced to 'disciplining structures' (ibid: 333). From this perspective, individuals are agents of their actions, ascribing shared meanings to what 'impersonal' rules consist of and continually working to secure agreement in their practice. The personal values and meanings attached to individual actions bring their decisions, or non-decisions, together to form, sustain, and reshape everyday routines and practices. While prison life research highlights how individuals adapt to manifestations of penal power, I will illustrate how men and women can alleviate decisions they perceive as hindering their employment aspirations by independently securing more meaningful employment opportunities. In Chapters 6 and 7, I will demonstrate how men and women can turn adverse prison experiences into opportunities for self-growth, ultimately leading to positive outcomes after their release. We have much to learn from understanding how factors inside prison, such as employment and family ties, influence resettlement and integration into the community.

There is a close connection between 'pains', 'adaptations', and 'identities'

in prison scholarship. The interaction between individual subjectivity and power relations reinforces key assumptions about the extent and experiences of incarceration (see Bosworth and Kaufman, 2012). Greer (2000) suggests that women's social status and position in society have contributed to increased self-awareness and the importance of their identities, making them more reflective and aware of their self-worth and values. However, women's self-understandings of their identities remain underexplored in the literature. This thesis offers an account of how men and women were able to reconstruct their identities inside prison and how this, in turn, enabled men to avoid criminal behaviour and empowered women to become more independent and confident in their choices.

Often depicted as an environment designed to mortify the self through displacement, loss of personal possessions, and other degradation rituals (Goffman, 1961), the prison space contributes to prisoner anxiety, social deterioration, and loss of self-identity. Goffman (1961) describes the effects of imprisonment on a person's identity as devastating. He argues that the 'recruit' to a total institution undergoes 'a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self' (Goffman, 1961: 24). Rowe (2011: 576) highlights how such abasements, as described by Goffman (1961), 'were often associated with loss of control over self-presentation'. Loss of status was frequently cited as 'taking on a stigmatised prisoner identity, difficult to reconcile with their existing sense of self' (Rowe, 2011: 577). Many prisoners 'reflected that coming to terms with guilt and shame and taking on what Goffman (1963) terms a "spoiled identity" was what it 'really meant to be in prison' (Rowe, 2011: 577). Many suggested that 'staff failed to appreciate the significance of these experiences. Private crises were often occluded by the institutional imperatives of people processing' (ibid: 577; Goffman, 1961).

The lack of status intensified this experience for prisoners.

Therefore, the experience of imprisonment has a profound impact on a person's identity. Identities are taken into prison, adapted in response to the effects of imprisonment, and continually negotiated - 'projected and defended - in social encounters' (Rowe, 2011: 574). Although open prisons are designed to reduce some of the more 'hard pains' of imprisonment, as described by early prison sociologists like Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958), by offering a regime intended to support resettlement and rehabilitation, prisoners still commonly experience anxiety and social decline. However, living in an open prison presents different challenges for men and women. Such challenges relate to 'ambiguity, ambivalence, and self-regulation' (Mjåland et al., 2021: 1658; see also Maier, 2020; Neumann, 2012; Shammass, 2014) rather than the traditional pains associated with closed prisons. Despite the disorientation and anxiety caused by transitioning into open prisons, I demonstrate that a person's identity can be reconstructed within an open prison, an aspect of prison scholarship that remains limited.

Prison sociologists have started to pay closer attention to how prisoners 'reinvent themselves' (Maier and Ricciardelli, 2022: 775). Drawing on Scott's (2010) concept of the 'reinventive institution', Crewe and Ievins (2019: 1) argue that while pains and hardships exist in the prison environment, it is also important to understand how imprisonment can lead to 'narratives of reinvention' and more positive outcomes in a person's life. The authors argue that prison can be a site of 'moral action' (ibid: 14) as it may provide a space for self-reflection. Van Ginneken (2014) similarly demonstrates that the prison can contribute to a positive reconstruction of individual identity.

Maruna et al. (2004: 161) theorise that imprisonment can lead to a 'sudden

identity transformation' because prisoners face a 'crisis of narrative'. Their identity is impacted because of their incarceration. As Maruna et al. (2004) explain, the 'identity crisis' can encourage prisoners to develop new forms of identity that are conducive to 'making good', establishing meaning through their punishment and hoping to build a better future.

More recently, Maier and Ricciardelli (2022) examined the narratives of change within prison settings in Canada of over 50 former male ex-prisoners. In their study, they focused on how ex-prisoners spoke about 'changes in their self and persona as they reflected on both their pre-prison selves and the ways they believed prison changed them' (ibid: 774). The participants described how residing in prison made them 'calmer', 'stronger', and more 'patient' overall (ibid). They explained that the 'prison functioned as a time and space for forced, self-reflection which pushed them to reflect on who they were before their incarceration but also who they wanted to be at release - recognising that who they were before incarceration did not necessarily reflect who they had become' (ibid: 785). Interviewees expressed that they 'learned inner strength' and discovered 'new interpretations of their lived experiences' as they aimed to build a more positive life (ibid). The participants did not mention any positive impacts related to the prison or the institution. Instead, they attributed positive outcomes to themselves and their desire to reinvent their future self. Like in Crewe and Ievins' (2019) study, the more positive accounts of the prison related to how incarceration provided a platform for self-reflection, rehabilitation, and learning to exhibit positive behaviours such as being patient and calm. Incarceration offered a space to self-reflect by which individuals 'learnt to manage and navigate prison living (e.g., learning patience) while reflecting on their persona' (Maier and Ricciardelli, 2022:

786).

In this thesis, I adopt a sociological interpretation of the term ‘self-reflection’. Given its multidimensional attributes, I define self-reflection as characterised by introspection and self-dialogue, in which mental states are scrutinised to develop self-understanding. As self-reflection is internalised and processed, it can be understood as a change of perspective within the individual.

Prisons can be viewed as sites that can shape a person’s trajectory and pathway on release. Front-line staff, including prison and probation officers, as well as other community actors, can play a crucial role in facilitating resettlement for men and women. As prisoners develop their identities, staff must acknowledge these changes and support them in their aspirations to abstain from crime, a commitment, for the most part, that prisoners work to achieve on their own. This thesis aims to contribute to emerging discussions on positive growth and identity development within prison settings. I, therefore, add to this research base (Crewe and Ievins, 2019; Liebling et al., 2019; van Ginneken, 2014), which has focused on the role of imprisonment in reconstructing narratives of identity. I highlight that identity transformation inside prison shapes post-imprisonment outcomes. Self-reflection is central to this transformation, as it enables individuals to consider the kind of identity they want to develop. The prison provides a space for prisoners to reflect on their pasts and the type of person they aspire to be.

I also build on gendered discussions of the ‘pains of imprisonment’, which have been sporadically examined across the literature (Crewe et al., 2017). Notably, there is a lack of empirical research comparing men’s and women’s imprisonment and post-release experiences, which makes reliable conclusions challenging. This research examines men’s and women’s accounts of identity development in open

prisons and how they intersect with their resettlement and post-release endeavours.

In the next section, I introduce Category D open prisons before analysing the literature on the prisoner experience in open conditions. This research base is significant to this thesis as the participants I interviewed were released from open prisons.

III. Category D Open Prisons

Category D open prisons were established in the United Kingdom during the 1940s and 1950s (Fox, 1948; Roper, 1950). Writing in the post-war period, Elkin (1947: 105) described the inception of open conditions as ‘sleeping in unlocked dormitories and movements not restrained by so much as a strand of wire’. In contrast to closed conditions, open prisons seek to provide greater degrees of autonomy, freedom of movement, and access to a range of resources to prepare prisoners for their release. At present, there are 16 open prisons in England and Wales. They include a smaller number of prisoners compared to those housed in medium-high security establishments. Open prisons are primarily located in remote, rural areas and accommodate men and women who are coming to the end of their sentences. Compared to Category A closed prisons, which house prisoners deemed most dangerous to society, Category D open prisons are categorised as the lowest level of security across the prison estate.

Open prisons have various functions, but primarily facilitate the transition of prisoners back into society. This is achieved through prison-based interventions and community-led initiatives, including rehabilitation programmes, purposeful activities (e.g., employment and education-based learning), and resettlement preparation for life after prison. To be granted residence in the open prison,

individuals must demonstrate that they have satisfactorily addressed their sentencing plans, been risk-assessed as suitable for open conditions, and shown positive behavioural outcomes. To satisfy the behavioural criteria, prisoners must attain the ‘enhanced status’ of the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme before they are transferred to the open prison. Enhanced status is the highest standard of behavioural performance in the prison estate. Enhanced privileges are ‘reserved for those prisoners who exceed Standard level by abiding by the behaviour principles and demonstrating the required types of behaviour to a consistently high standard, including good attendance and attitude at activities and education/work and interventions’ (Ministry of Justice, 2024b: 20).

In addition to being categorised as ‘low-risk’ to the public, higher levels of behavioural expectations are placed on prisoners in open conditions. Prisoners can secure paid work within the prison, seek employment in the community, and visit their families during home visits. To access these opportunities, they must first obtain approval for Release on Temporary License (ROTL), which serves to ‘facilitate the rehabilitation of offenders by helping to prepare them for resettlement in the community once they are released’ (Ministry of Justice, 2022a: 1). This way, the individual can experience the benefits of the outside world and remain connected to the community to which they will return. Open prisons, therefore, can provide a ‘penal sweet spot’ (Pakes, 2023: 2) by maintaining the deprivation of liberty as punishment but releasing prisoners into the community to support their resettlement endeavours. Prisoners serving a fixed-term determinate sentence are eligible for release once they have completed half of their sentence. Once released, prisoners serve the remainder of their sentence in the community on licence conditions while under the supervision of the Probation Service.

Given that they were established more than half a century ago, it is surprising that so little research has been conducted within these kinds of penal establishments. Over the last decade, academic scholars have begun to address the experience of prisoners in open conditions (Micklethwaite and Earle, 2021; Mjåland et al., 2021; Neumann, 2012; Pakes, 2023; Shammas, 2014; Statham et al., 2021; Ugelvik and Damsa, 2018). Sykes's (1958) work in *The Society of Captives* has influenced much of the prison scholarship. Sykes outlined distinct prison pains, which he described as 'deprivations of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security' (ibid: 65-78). For Sykes, the pains of liberty and autonomy were symbolic of the hardships of prison life.

Building on the work of Sykes and other prison sociologists (see inter alia Crewe, 2011a; Liebling, 2011), Shammas (2014) has argued that new deprivations and burdens have expanded the substantive reach of prison pains. In his ethnographic study of a Norwegian open prison, Shammas (2014: 108) describes the 'pains of freedom' as an 'experientially bittersweet privilege under the constraints of penal confinement'. Whereas liberty and autonomy characterise the closed prison (Sykes, 1958), freedom encapsulates such deprivation in the open prison (Shammas, 2014). Freedom is perceived as extremely 'fragile', and prisoners must exercise decisions meticulously to avoid being transferred back to closed conditions. 'Constrained freedom' is woven into the very fabric of the prison regime and experienced as 'bittersweet or tainted' (Shammas, 2014: 104).

More recently, Micklethwaite and Earle (2021) describe a complex and disorienting experience of transitioning from closed to open conditions in the United Kingdom. Residing in the closed prison estate was reported as 'anxious, unsure, and ineffective' (ibid: 543). By contrast, in the open prison, 'becoming self-

sufficient, managing ambiguity, and negotiating autonomy' (ibid) was necessary to accelerate progression within the prison system, but was gradual. The freedom to exercise autonomy and agency relatively independent of prison authorities was experienced as profoundly unnerving. As narrated by the author (ibid: 540), 'the simple notion of doing something for myself, spontaneously, without seeking permission, brought to me that I was not used to operating without clearly demarcated behavioural boundaries and explicit permissions as to what I could or could not do'.

Similarly, Mjåland et al. (2021: 1656-1657), in their comparative study of imprisonment in open and closed prisons in England, Wales and Norway, stated that while prison pains such as 'deprivation of liberty and the loss of contact with family and friends' were commonly perceived in both types of prisons, they were described as 'less severe and more manageable in open prisons' and on average, experienced as 'safer, less restrictive, and less degrading institutions than closed prisons'. Since prisoners can undertake resettlement duties in the community, such as employment, and visit their families through Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), this suggests that open prisons perhaps produce a more 'distinct set of pains related to ambiguity, ambivalence, and self-regulation' (Mjåland et al., 2021: 1657; see also Maier, 2020; Neumann, 2012; Shammass, 2014) rather than the traditional prison pains commonly experienced in closed conditions (Sykes, 1958).

While such accounts in the British context touch on some of the more positive experiences in open conditions, Crewe (2015: 59) calls for more studies on the 'shallowness' of these environments to determine how 'congruent they are with community life'. Pakes (2023) examined the physical and social characteristics of these establishments in his analysis of Iceland's two open prisons.

The permeation of the outside world into the prison was closely associated with meaningful visual and sensory interactions, making the prison feel less alienating. ‘Shallowness’ is characterised by scenic settings, cordial staff-prisoner relations and a good deal of free movement, representing a setting for a prisoner experience that is, in essence, shallow’ (Pakes, 2023: 2). Shamma’s (2014: 104) fieldwork in a low-security prison in Norway found seemingly highly shallow conditions: ‘lower-security with limited outer-perimeter control, a more trusting attitude toward inmates among staff, and greater opportunities for autonomy, freedom of movement and leave to outside society for inmates than more typical prisons’. Building on the work of Shamma, Pakes (2023: 12) argues that shallowness acquires a ‘semi-permanent presence’ in the prison space, providing prisoners with social, cultural, and physical characteristics intrinsic to everyday routines and practices. Shallowness was therefore experienced as most prevalent when the normative functions of daily life were aligned to mirror experiences akin to the outside world.

However, Hancock and Jewkes (2011) warn that prison environments, which tend to occupy more prominent spaces and are typically cleaner and brighter, may generate their own ‘insidious form of control’ and may be perceived as trying to conceal the fact that prisoners are serving a sentence. The ability to exercise autonomy and the relatively free movement in and outside of the prison encourage individuals to self-rehabilitate. Yet, simultaneously, they are reminded of the consequences of deviation from the prisoner regime or breaching Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) conditions while fulfilling resettlement duties in the community. Therefore, ‘freedom’ in the open prison may be disguised as an imaginary experience.

Furthermore, prison officers are no longer the ‘invisible ghosts of penalty’ (Liebling, 2000: 337) or ‘merely shadowy figures, peripheral to the main action, who are just *there* as an inertial and conservative influence’ (Sparks et al., 1996: 60). Staff exercise considerable authority and ‘soft power’ through their ability to determine privilege levels and formulate prisoner assessment reports that contribute to early release schemes and re-categorisation. Most prisoners are induced to interact with staff for self-interest. Relationships can often be motivated instrumentally and superficially to expedite outcomes, such as obtaining positive reports and increasing flexibility in Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) conditions. However, this does not mean that all staff-prisoner relationships are characterised by instrumental means. There are several indications that investing in maintaining healthy relationships within prison has generated positive effects (see Crewe, 2009; Hulley et al., 2012; Warr, 2008). Instead, it is to state that staff-prisoner relationships have become intensified through penal policies where progression and reliance on additional opportunities or extra ‘perks’ depend on getting these relationships right.

In the open prison, individual behaviour is carefully managed as prisoners are mainly responsible for addressing their offending behaviour. There are significant consequences if prisoners misbehave in open prisons. For example, if prisoners breach the conditions of their Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) while working in the community, they risk being transferred back to closed conditions. Navigating the psychological pains of imprisonment while actively demonstrating compliance with the regime is experienced as a ‘bittersweet freedom’ (Shammas, 2014: 114). Neumann (2012) argues that prisoners often have little choice but to present a visible identity that is compatible with the desired

institutional norms. A ‘good prisoner’ categorisation compels individuals to ‘conduct a self-control that can be extremely challenging’ (ibid: 151). Even though the physical body remains relatively free, such surveillance practices, or what Foucault (1991: 20) describes as ‘governmentality’, form an extreme case of ‘imprisoning the soul’ (Neumann, 2012: 148). This mode of penal punishment ‘from a distance’ is concerned with scrutiny of individual behaviour and the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Garland, 2001), embodying elements of the ultimate version of Garland’s culture of control.

From a Foucauldian perspective, prisoners are encouraged to become self-governing agents responsible for the terms of their incarceration (Crewe, 2011a; see also Garland, 2001). In open prisons, such ‘responsibilisation strategies’ (Hannah-Moffat, 2001) are pertinent for progression within the system, as they aim to reconstruct prisoners as architects of their future (Foucault, 1995 [1977]). These neoliberal tendencies, which involve taking responsibility for securing work and addressing offending behaviour, create self-rehabilitating agents who are obliged to comply with prison norms or risk the consequences of disobedient behaviour (Crewe, 2011a). Passive obedience is insufficient to progress through the system. Individuals must demonstrate visible compliance with the prison regime or face the disadvantages of not being recognised as engaging with penal policies (Khan, 2020). To mitigate the ‘pains of freedom’ in the open prison (Shammas, 2014), prisoners must identify alternative avenues to overcome such pains (see Statham et al., 2021).

It is fair to say that, despite the limited research conducted within open prisons, there is a stream of emerging research in the United Kingdom (Micklethwaite and Earle, 2021; Mjåland et al., 2021; Statham et al., 2021) and the

Nordic context (Pakes, 2023; Shammass, 2014; Ugelvik and Damsa, 2018). The cited studies have made notable contributions to the literature on open prisons by describing how the pains of imprisonment manifest when penal power is exercised. However, there is still much to learn from examining prisoners' experiences within open conditions in England. Given the focus of open prisons on supporting prisoner resettlement, surprisingly little research has explored the extent to which these establishments are preparing men and women for their release.

I chose to contribute to this knowledge base and situate the research in open prisons because they play a crucial role in supporting a person's transition from prison to society. Furthermore, open prisons accommodate men and women coming to the end of their sentence, which allowed me to conduct post-release interviews with the same group of individuals in the community. Regimes centred on rehabilitation and resettlement were vital as they allowed me to explore critical aspects of the prisoner regime, such as employment opportunities. These regime aspects were examined to determine their impact on post-release outcomes, contributing to the study's research aims. In the next section, I turn to the literature on desistance, which forms the primary focus of this dissertation.

IV. Defining Desistance

The 'offender' who engages in criminality is often represented as comparatively 'different' to the ordinary law-abiding citizen and 'once a criminal always a criminal' (Maruna and King, 2009: 20). Yet, contrary to popular belief, often the people society labels as 'offenders' only spend a short period in their lives engaged in crime (Farrington, 1992; Sampson and Laub, 1993) and eventually 'grow out' of delinquency (Maruna, 2017). Criminologists have labelled this path away from

criminal behaviour as ‘desistance from crime’.

Desistance research is one of criminology’s most vibrant and dynamic fields (Cleere, 2021; Grace, 2022; Hart and van Ginneken, 2017; Kazemian, 2020; Maruna, 2017; Rodermond et al., 2022; Villman, 2021). A growing body of work has sought to understand how and why individuals can withdraw from crime despite their numerous obstacles when released from prison (Abrams and Terry, 2017; Fox, 2015; Liem and Richardson, 2014). Although desistance has become an increasingly popular topic of inquiry in recent years, there is still much to learn from examining the subject.

Conceptually, desistance is difficult to define. As Maruna (2001: 17) states, ‘it is not an event that happens, rather it is the sustained absence of a certain type of event’, which is hard to observe directly. He explains that people do not simply fall into ‘desister’ and ‘persister’ categories and are not recorded as such in official statistics and national reports. Practical questions have therefore arisen regarding how to define when someone has completely stopped offending.

In its simplest form, desistance can be understood as the process of abstaining from crime. Criminologists have expanded this definition to include the process and stages that enable people to cease criminality and sustain their new behaviour (Bushway et al., 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001; Weaver, 2016). Shover (1996: 121) defines desistance as ‘the voluntary termination of serious criminal participation’, suggesting that a person’s pathway to law-abiding life can only be determined once they have detached themselves from committing serious crimes. Whether desistance has occurred if the person still participates in low-level offending must be questioned. Shortly after being released from prison, they may ‘drift’ between conforming and deviant behaviour (Burnett,

2004; Matza, 1964). Farrall and Bowling (1999: 258) explain desistance similarly as ‘the moment that a criminal career ends’. While technically accurate, this definition has been criticised as overly simplistic and one-dimensional. It can be argued that desistance does not occur in a single episode, mainly because the criminal activity is often sporadic and unpredictable.

Other commentators, such as Laub and Sampson (2001) and Bottoms et al. (2004), have characterised desistance as termination of offending in the life course of a criminal career. The criminal career literature portrays desistance as an abrupt cessation of criminal activity and is most often based on quantitative methodologies that track longitudinal cohorts over time (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Again, this definition of desistance can be criticised. For Maruna (2001), ‘termination’ can only truly be established at the time of death, given that a person may reoffend until that point. In any case, as Bushway et al. (2001) argue, emphasising the final state of non-offending fails to address the process of how an individual arrived there. Instead, they suggest that desistance should be conceptualised as a process, an ongoing commitment to live a law-abiding life, rather than as one decision to ‘go straight’.

In light of these critiques, Maruna (2001: 26) defines desistance as ‘the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending’. This definition suggests that desistance is a process. There must be a prolonged absence of criminal activity, but it recognises that people often follow a zig-zag path and that reoffending may be possible. There is widespread agreement that moving away from crime is not straightforward (Healy, 2010). As Burnett (2004: 169) states, ‘people oscillate on what we visualise as a dimension on a continuum, between criminality and

conformity’. For the vast majority, complete criminality and conformity are points never likely to be reached on such a continuum.

Maruna and Farrall (2004) distinguish between primary and secondary desistance. While the former refers to a period of non-offending, the latter involves ‘the movement from the behaviours of non-offending to the assumption of a role or identity of a non-offender or ‘changed person’ (Maruna and Farrall, 2004: 19). They argue that primary desistance is of little theoretical interest as crime-free gaps in offending behaviour occur periodically in a criminal career. Indeed, scholars tend to pay more attention to secondary desistance (Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996). Additionally, McNeill (2014, 2016) proposed the idea of ‘tertiary desistance’ (see also Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Weaver, 2013) to highlight the recognition of change by others and a shift in a person’s sense of belonging to a community.

I do not propose formulating a new definition of desistance. Instead, I expand on the work of past academics. One definition that is particularly suited to understanding the prison experience and desistance is outlined by Anderson and McNeill (2019). They define desistance as ‘the process of human development (inevitably occurring in and affected by social contexts) that involved moving away from crime and toward social integration and participation’ (ibid: 600). Kazemian (2020: 93) expands this definition by stating that ‘desistance entails a *conscious* commitment to change the attitudes and behaviours that cause intentional harm to oneself and others’. In both definitions, individual change is a central concept.

In this thesis, I draw on accounts of desistance that align closely with the definitions proposed by Anderson and McNeill (2019) and Kazemian (2020). There are several reasons for this approach. Firstly, as my research focuses on

understanding the transition from prison to the community and people's motivations to reinstate their lives, combining structural and individual desistance components is fruitful. To sufficiently understand desistance as a process, we must focus on sequences of events rather than a single transition.

Therefore, I conceptualise desistance as a process in which individuals navigate a series of transitional events, many of which co-occur. Sequencing transitional events can partly explain the narrow focus on discrete life course transitions. Analysing the motivations of desistance requires us to assess a broader constellation of interconnecting factors that are mutually reinforcing. Understanding the relationship between imprisonment and desistance necessitates an integrated approach. This approach examines both individual and structural factors that play a crucial role in facilitating people's transition from prison to society, underscoring the complexity of desistance. Examining desistance in this way broadens our conceptualisation of desistance. It adds a much-needed interrelated dimension to explain how individual and structural factors work in tandem to shape resettlement aspirations and post-release integration.

V. What We Know About Desistance from Crime

Over time, most individuals move away from criminal activity. A person's desire to change their life is a first step (Farrall et al., 2010). However, this desire alone is often not enough. Transitioning from contemplating change to successfully achieving it can be difficult (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). Like most pathways, both the social environment and the individual change over time, making desistance a complex process (Bottoms et al., 2004; Maruna and Farrall, 2004; Weaver and McNeill, 2010). Desistance is not solely about wanting to change; it

also requires an opportunity to do so. Giordano et al. (2002) describe such opportunities as ‘hooks for change’. Abstaining from crime is a gradual process influenced by an interaction between internal (personal and cognitive) and external (structural and environmental) factors (Farrall and Bowling, 1999).

While structural factors and identity construction play a central role in explaining desistance, there appears to be a greater emphasis on structural factors (Cleere, 2021; Healy, 2010). However, it is agreed that any comprehensive analysis should include internal and external factors (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Furthermore, although there is a growing body of literature on desistance seeking to address women’s lived experiences (Bachman et al., 2016; Giordano et al., 2002; Grace, 2022; Michalsen, 2019; Rodermond et al., 2016; 2022; Uggen and Kruttschnitt, 1998), it remains the case that most empirical studies of desistance (as of the prison) have been primarily based on men’s accounts. I therefore chose to interview women to build on the existing literature and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences of imprisonment and accounts of desistance.

1. Structural Factors

Structural explanations of desistance emphasise extrinsic factors, such as social, historical, institutional, situational, and cultural factors, that influence individual decision-making (Bersani and Doherty, 2018). Often, people contend with these factors when they are released from prison, allowing them to mitigate their struggles and hardships in the community. The barriers to resettlement and post-release integration are significant and can impact aspirations to abstain from crime, especially when they are perceived as insurmountable (LeBel et al., 2008). The individual often encounters several obstacles they must navigate while attempting

to implement the structures required to accommodate their basic needs. Often, these barriers mirror the structures required to facilitate desistance. How people confront and deal with these barriers will impact their ability to desist from crime. One of the most significant barriers to integration is employment. Employment is one of the three key themes examined in this thesis.

A) Employment

Many studies have examined the influences of employment on individual offending trajectories (Laub and Sampson, 2001; 2020; Rocque, 2017). Notably, over 30 years ago, Sampson and Laub (1993) found that successfully holding down paid work was a critical turning point in the life course transition. Adopting a ‘social bonds’ theoretical approach, Laub and Sampson (2003: 6) contend that ‘the stronger the adult ties to work, the less crime and deviance among [former] delinquents’. Creating prosocial bonds attached to society has been cited as one of the most important factors in establishing a new conformist identity (Vaughan, 2007). Prosocial bonds are described as central elements of informal social control that generate ‘social capital’ and, as a result, positively impact people’s lives. The greater the accumulation of social capital, the more an individual’s bond to society strengthens and the less likely they are to engage in future criminal activity (Shover, 1996). People are more likely to desist from crime to maintain their new bonds to society, which, in turn, can result in long-term behavioural change (Laub and Sampson, 2001). The empirical evidence suggests that paid employment is one of the most vital links to social capital in facilitating desistance (Farrall, 2004).

While employment is generally seen as supporting desistance, it does not solely cause or trigger it. Instead, the meanings and values connected to the quality

of employment, and how this influences a person's self-identity and interacts with their personal goals and aspirations, explain this relationship (Uggen, 2000; Weaver, 2016). There is, therefore, a subjective aspect to the quality of employment and its potential effect on crime. Jaynes (2020: 722) found that regardless of gender, 'transitioning from not working to working a low-quality job can be criminogenic'. This indicates that, while gaining employment is crucial for reducing the chance of reoffending, the nature of the job ultimately matters. Employment must therefore not only be accessible within the societal context but also regarded as socially desirable (Giordano et al., 2002).

The significance of gaining meaningful work contributes to individual goals and aspirations, which are essential to turn plans into reality (Heckhausen and Heckhausen, 2008). Employment is not only experienced as financial motivation but also concerns self-respect and control that people hope to gain through work. Cobbina (2009) shows that employment can be a turning point if the job contributes to feelings of self-worth. Similarly, Farrall (2005) suggests that the workplace can create a platform to rebuild an individual's sense of self and influence their aspirations. In Villman's (2021) qualitative study of desistance expectations, most interviewees were optimistic about leaving prison and had concrete plans to help them avoid committing crimes again. Employment was described as fundamental to instilling a sense of self-respect and control. Similar findings are documented in Rodermond et al.'s. (2022) research, which showed that having a job-embedded structure in women's lives made them proud of themselves. Securing employment was motivated by an aptitude to 'do something different with their life' (Rodermond et al., 2022: 1869). Women who went on to undertake voluntary work benefited more from their new jobs than those who secured paid

work.

It has been suggested that structural factors, such as employment, may be more relevant in explaining why men are less likely to commit crimes. In contrast, changes in identity may be more pertinent to understanding women's desistance (Giordano et al., 2002). This explanation may help us understand why employment is more commonly associated with men's resettlement and post-release integration narratives. Employment for women may be less relevant as a 'hook for change' (Giordano et al., 2002) because 'it may be difficult for women to overcome many complex challenges to obtain, and then maintain, employment that is both rewarding and sustainable' (Flower, 2010: 16). In her review of the desistance literature, Kruttschnitt (2016: 10) concludes that 'employment seems to benefit males more than females because female offenders find it more difficult to find employment that is meaningful'. Such accounts, however, do not negate the possibility that women can benefit from other, more meaningful jobs, particularly when combined with different elements of social capital (see Giordano et al., 2002).

Since most of the literature on post-imprisonment employment focuses on men's experiences, it is understandable that employment has a more notable impact on males than on females (Benda, 2005; Cobbina et al., 2012; Verbruggen et al., 2012). Although most studies comparing genders indicate that employment influences men's desistance more significantly, these findings should not dismiss the potential positive effects of employment on women's desistance. While women's employment prospects are heavily restricted after imprisonment (McIvor, 2019), I will expand on this existing body of research to demonstrate that structural barriers to employment share many similarities across genders rather than being

solely based on gender differences.

Recent initiatives have aimed to eliminate barriers to employment. The charity Business in the Community launched the national ‘Ban the Box’ campaign to remove the requirement to disclose convictions on job applications and to create a fairer system for employing people with convictions (Business in the Community, 2023). The government introduced the ‘New Futures Network’ to ‘broker partnerships between prisons and employers’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2018: 3), creating opportunities for people leaving prison. Despite efforts to reform the penal system, legislative and corporate policies still frequently rely on criminal record checks, portraying individuals as ‘risky’ or ‘dangerous’ and establishing structures, systems, and practices designed to control their behaviour. Criminal histories are more easily accessible through employer background checks and publicly available information, making the effects of criminal labelling increasingly ‘sticky’ (Uggen and Blahnik, 2016). Therefore, while these initiatives aim to promote a more level playing field, employers can still conduct background checks at their discretion and use this information to exclude candidates during recruitment.

The structural barriers to employment for people leaving prison can be contextualised against neoliberal-informed penal politics. In a feminist critique of post-imprisonment jobs in Canada, Grace (2022: 85) argued that ‘social, political, and legal systems entrench poverty and marginalisation within the neoliberal labour system’. Barr (2023: 171), in her qualitative study of women’s employment experiences, explains how these barriers to employment in the English neoliberal political context are expressed through ‘criminal records, 0 hours contracts,’ the ‘cost of living crisis,’ and the concept of the ‘working poor’. Structural

disadvantages are furthermore compounded by financial hardships before imprisonment (McIvor, 2019) and exacerbated by the same institutional structures once individuals are released from prison. In the four weeks before custody, 68% of the prison population were unemployed, compared to 8% of the general population (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). One in ten people are in paid employment six weeks after leaving prison, which rises to around one in seven after six months (ibid). Women are less likely than men to be in work six weeks post-imprisonment. Additionally, ‘the good woman, who supports her partner’s desistance, often has to do this additional unpaid care work whilst maintaining her own desistance’ (Barr, 2023: 157). Prisoners experience the neoliberal pains of being an ‘ex-offender’, where jobs are precarious and underpaid, working poverty is a salient reality (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022), and prisoner support services are fragmented and impacted by the effects of austerity measures (Mansfield and Cooper, 2017).

While employment plays a key role in supporting desistance, it is important to recognise that prisoners most often come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Cleere (2021) explains that prisoners generally have lower educational attainment than the wider population, poor employment histories, and face socioeconomic deprivation. Frequently, individuals are released from prison into a society where stigma and prejudice against ex-prisoners are high. These issues create significant barriers to securing employment for this group. Therefore, employment alone cannot fully account for desistance. We need to consider other factors linked to desistance to ensure that, when employment is not feasible, alternative stabilising elements are in place to help integrate the individual into the community. The next section will explore the literature on family ties, the second key theme examined in this dissertation.

B) Family Ties

It is well established in criminological literature that the family can provide vital support in resettlement efforts and post-release integration, a recognition that has sparked interest in the role of family ties in desistance (Calverley, 2013; Christian, 2020; Healy, 2010; Rodermond et al., 2016). Another branch of literature has examined the negative effects of imprisonment on families and how these are experienced in different ways (Annison and Condry, 2022; Comfort, 2008; Condry and Minson, 2020; Granja, 2016; Jardine, 2017). These two areas of scholarship are often pursued as separate lines of inquiry.

Jardine (2017: 165) has shown that ‘the increasing interest in the role of family ties in desistance from crime has given rise to a range of theoretical perspectives on how these relationships might support more positive and prosocial behaviours’. For instance, families have been seen to provide resources to prisoners in the form of social capital (Farrall, 2004) act as ‘turning points’ for people attempting to make positive changes to their lives (Sampson and Laub, 1993), moments of realisation to reconstruct identities and promote individual growth (Giordano et al., 2007; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009), and encouraging ‘generative’ ambitions to reinstate their lives and give back to their family and society (Maruna, 2001). As there is a recognition that desistance involves both favourable structural conditions and shifts in identity (Bottoms et al., 2004), a running theme in this body of literature is that family ties motivate the desistance process and provide social and emotional support, such as housing or employment (McGillivray, 2016; Weaver, 2016).

Desistance scholars have been criticised for viewing the family solely in light of reduced reoffending. Other academics have documented the often

debilitating impact of imprisonment on families (Annison and Condry, 2022; Codd, 2008; Comfort, 2008; Halsey and Deegan, 2015). Some individuals may feel relief when a prison sentence is given. Others, however, may experience the custodial sentence of a family member as highly traumatising, stigmatising and isolating (Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2007). Families may experience increased emotional strains or responsibilities, such as childcare (Loureiro, 2010). There may also be increased financial burdens, including legal costs, visits, phone calls, and gifts for the prisoner (Comfort, 2008). Prisoners' families often 'do the time' with them (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2007; Condry and Minson, 2020) and encounter 'secondary prisonisation' as they are subjected to the same elaborate regulations and levels of intense surveillance that incarcerated people face (Aiello and McCorkel, 2018). Such prison-related processes (e.g., monitoring phone calls and sending money) become normalised. Consequently, families may feel powerless to affect their position given the restrictions on physical contact, long waits, degradation from staff, lack of privacy and crowded conditions (Comfort, 2008). Such extensive security controls can also make some family members feel like 'quasi-inmates' (Arditti, 2012). Jardine (2017: 165) argues that 'cumulatively, these difficulties can exacerbate the high levels of social disadvantage already experienced by many families affected by imprisonment'.

The family is one of the few social institutions that promotes change for individuals trying to abstain from crime. In Healy's (2010) study, participants turned to family members to secure social support. Still, at the same time, they acknowledged the hardships they inflicted on their families due to their offending and sought to rebuild their relationships with them. The concept of reciprocity in familial relationships is a crucial factor in sustaining support over time, which, in

turn, fosters a sense of independence and self-reliance. Support is, therefore, dependent on a person's capacity to receive it and their capacity and willingness to offer it. In their qualitative study with male ex-prisoners, Christian (2020) found that individuals decided which family members were best placed at different times to provide support. Some men reported that 'family members providing support were formerly incarcerated individuals themselves' (ibid: 234). These family members may be understanding and sensitive to their needs. Thus, they may be better equipped to help alleviate difficulties upon release, such as managing the stigma associated with the criminal label (Maruna and LeBel, 2002). However, as Hassan et al. (2022) remind us, particularly for newly released prisoners who reside with non-convicted family members, living with someone who has just left prison is no easy task. Some burdens come with living with people monitored by criminal justice agencies. Comfort (2016) describes these burdens as an extensive daily task that can impact familial bonds, as family members may feel obligated to support their loved ones with various psychological and practical tasks (see also Condry, 2007; Condry and Minson, 2020).

The notion that the family has a moral obligation to facilitate the desistance process is shown to have distinctive cultural dimensions. In Calverley's (2013) book *Cultures of Desistance*, two fundamental differences were noted among men of Bangladeshi, Indian and Black and Dual Heritage when looking at the effects of the family upon desistance endeavours. The narratives of the Indians and Bangladeshis were concerned with a reorientation towards their communities and families. There was an attitude of reparation and forgiveness for the crimes committed and a conscious willingness to assist in reintegrating them into their family. Reciprocity 'generated a sense of personal indebtedness towards their

family, which provided them with further incentive to maintain their efforts' (Calverley, 2013: 107). To minimise the impact of how the family would be perceived in the eyes of others, Indian families took exceptional measures to protect the reputation and appearance of their son's criminality. They played a crucial part in encouraging desistance, which was 'marked by an absence of processes of labelling on the part of their families' (ibid: 186). The Bangladeshi's abstinence from crime highlighted a collective endeavour where their families played a central role in their aspirations to live law-abiding lives.

By contrast, the Black and Dual Heritage men's desistance was 'largely characterised by *disengagement* from their community and family' (Calverley, 2013: 184). The main finding for the black men was that they adopted more individualistic endeavours to desist compared to the other two ethnic groups. They had access to fewer resources, less family influence on their post-release integration, limited avenues into work, little social capital, and less interaction with family compared with South Asians. These findings reinforce McNeill's (2003) argument that desistance-focused interventions and programmes within the criminal justice system should concentrate on building positive relationships between prisoners and their families. As Weaver and McNeill (2007: 1) note, like everyone else, 'offenders are most influenced to change (and not to change) by those closest to them and those whose advice they respect and support they value'.

Family and support networks are equally important to women's integration and desistance. 'Hooks for change' (Giordano et al., 2002) are essential, but women must also be committed to believing they can achieve and sustain their desistance (McIvor, 2019; Rodermond et al., 2016). Relationships with family and support enable women to 'establish a connection with law-abiding citizens and

conventional institutions while simultaneously providing them with a legitimate identity' (Cobbina, 2010: 213). These relationships are more significant for women's desistance than for men's (Rodermond et al., 2016). However, as I will illustrate in Chapter 6, the gendered differences in the effects of family ties on desistance are not always as distinct as the literature suggests.

While scholars have emphasised the significance of structural factors, such as employment and family ties, in explaining desistance, they have paid less attention to the role of identity change, which can enable pathways out of crime (although see Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). In contrast, my research found that structural and individual factors mutually reinforce each other in the process of desistance. To clarify this perspective, the following section will analyse the literature on identity construction, the third key theme examined in this study.

VI. Identity Construction

It is widely recognised in academic discourse that identity transformation is vital in helping individuals desist from crime (Burnett, 2004; Giordano et al., 2002; King, 2013b; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). The narrative approach to understanding desistance highlights subjective changes that guide the individual towards a law-abiding life (Farrall, 2005; Gadd and Farrall, 2004; Maruna, 2001). King (2013b) contends that identity reconstruction occurs during the early transitions from prison to society. He described an 'early desistance narrative', where individuals see offending as incompatible with their new identity and work to distance themselves from their past self (see also Vaughan, 2007). According to King (2013b), this identity change, from 'offender' to 'non-offender', leads to a shift in a person's sense of moral agency and contributes to their

permanent abstinence from criminal activity. A process of self-evaluation acts ‘as a kind of cognitive filter for decision making’ (Giordano, 2010: 31). Gadd and Farrall (2004) arrive at a similar conclusion, stating that an individual’s choice of committing another crime is significantly influenced by how they perceive themselves. While critical scholars have recognised the significance of structural factors, such as family ties and employment, they emphasise cognitive and identity transformation, as well as the ability of individuals to self-actualise on their own accord (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001).

Maruna’s (2001) desistance framework is one of the most relevant to this dissertation. In his seminal book, *Making Good*, Maruna (2001) compared the narratives of a group of men who persisted in criminal activity with those of another group who had desisted from crime. The ‘persisters’ possessed a ‘condemnation script’ in which they perceived the obstacles in society as increasingly difficult to overcome and, therefore, were destined for criminality. By contrast, the ‘desisters’ formed a ‘redemption script’ that characterised their identity. Underpinning this redemption script was understanding how to overturn obstacles, a desire to ‘make good’ from past mistakes and a belief in the agency to foster a new ‘coherent pro-social identity’. Desisters conveyed ‘generative’ ambitions to reinstate their lives and make societal contributions. ‘Making good’ revealed the importance of discovering their ‘good core self’ and constructing an optimistic image of the future. Learning from mistakes and transforming harmful behaviours from the past into positive trajectories are critical elements in the process of ‘self-reconstruction’ (Farrall et al., 2014; Vaughan, 2007).

Writing in a similar guise, other academics argue that identity construction requires more than developing a self-narrative determined by past life events.

Identity also consists of future aspirations - the 'ideal self' one is working towards becoming (Vaughan, 2007). Paternoster and Bushway (2009) make a distinction between 'the working self' (oriented toward the present) and 'the possible self' (oriented toward the future). In this identity theory, individuals were likelier to abstain from crime when motivated to move toward the hoped-for-self. The authors further explain that 'the motivation to move toward a desired self is strengthened by the image of the feared-about-self that is incompatible with it' (ibid: 1119). They suggest that internal changes in a person's identity, reflected in their preferences and value orientations, are more likely when there is a purposeful shift in their sense of self. This 'weakening of one's commitment to a criminal identity' occurs when they experience repeated failure, and of the 'attribution of those linked failures to one's identity and life as a criminal....and the projection into the future of continued life dissatisfaction' (Bushway and Paternoster, 2013: 223). Their theory emphasises that sustained desistance stems from having 'had enough of crime' (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009: 1108) and a commitment to reconstruct one's identity. Individuals who can exercise decisions and exert self-control in their lives are more likely to be able to desist from crime.

Several academics have granted an essential role to cognitive changes that promote desistance. Giordano et al. (2002) notably developed the theory of cognitive transformation to explain the desistance process. The authors outlined four processes of cognitive transformation. First, the person must be open to the possibility of change. Second, the individual willingly and actively commits to change and secures positive social experiences to facilitate their desistance (e.g., obtaining employment). These 'hooks for change' enable individuals to build an alternative identity (Giordano et al., 2002; see also Weaver and McNeill, 2015).

Third, the person conforms to and practices their new non-criminal identity. Finally, the individual understands the negative consequences of offending and no longer perceives it as an option.

The study of cognitive changes that promote desistance focuses on the concept of ‘human agency’ and is a fundamental part of developing a positive identity (Healy, 2014; King, 2013b; Rocque et al., 2014). Human agency is described as ‘the idea that individuals have free will and remain active participants in their life journey’ (Kazemian, 2020: 60). Agency is not a static concept but rather a flexible state influenced by social, cultural, and political factors. Social structures and support mechanisms are vital for exercising agency and supporting identity transformation. The role of agency in desistance narratives reflects Maruna and King’s (2009) call for ‘moral redeemability’. People can actively shape their future paths, and a person’s past is not necessarily a fixed outcome of their destiny. From this perspective, criminality is not an inherent trait, but rather seen as an adaptation to specific life circumstances, which can be altered by directly addressing those circumstances.

In striving to live a crime-free life, scholars have noted the significance of motivation and hope in desistance endeavours (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Farrall, 2002; Farrall and Calverley, 2006). Burnett (1994: 131) defines hope as ‘the perceived availability of successful pathways to related goals’ in the criminological context. Hope is intertwined with individual factors associated with human agency, such as confidence, motivation, and self-belief, that support men and women in overcoming hurdles when released from prison. When people make conscious efforts to desist, hopelessness is replaced by hope and ‘low self-esteem by self-confidence and self-efficacy’ (Stevens, 2012: 14). As Cleere (2021: 131) reminds

us, ‘where a person has strong levels of hope, they are more likely to recognise and seize pro-social opportunities and make them more resilient in the face of setbacks’ (see also Burnett and Maruna, 2004). Kazemian (2020) found that hope in the desistance narrative is essential but not necessarily a distinctive feature in and of itself. In her prison study, the French interviewees ‘did not solely rely on hopeful ambitions about their release; they were also prepared to take on possible challenges’ (ibid: 191). A hopeful future is critical in predicting desistance as it provides people ‘with the vision that an alternative “normal” life is both desirable and, ultimately...possible’ (Farrall and Calverley, 2006: 192-193). This can prompt a shift from a life of crime to a law-abiding life.

As mentioned earlier, even if identity construction plays a central role in abstinence from crime, the social contexts created by employment and family ties may still be necessary to successfully maintain a crime-free life (Giordano, 2017). For many people leaving prison, especially those with a history of incarceration, the barriers to integration can be extensive. While initial plans may be devised, individuals will likely face unexpected challenges and navigate the ‘obstacle-strewn path to desistance’ (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011: 275). What is clear, however, is that both individual and structural factors contribute to desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2003; LeBel et al., 2008). As Farrall and Bowling’s (1999: 261) integrated model demonstrates, desistance is regarded as an ‘interplay between individual choices, and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual’.

While it is acknowledged that both individual and structural factors contribute to people moving away from crime, there has been significantly less research on the role of penal practitioners in supporting the desistance process. As

this study is primarily situated in the post-release context, the following section examines research on probation and desistance to understand the impact of the Probation Service on prisoners' transition into society.

VII. The Role of Probation in Supporting Desistance

The role of community provision in facilitating resettlement and desistance from crime has been well documented in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Durnescu, 2011; Fernando, 2021; King, 2013a). Leibrich's (1993) qualitative research on probationers in New Zealand was one of the first studies to explore the relationship between probation supervision and desistance. Drawing on interviews with 48 'desisting' male and female ex-probationers, the study found mixed perceptions on the effectiveness of probation supervision. Few people cited probation as contributing to their desistance, and only half considered it worthwhile. The quality of supervisory relationships, however, was shown to support the process of desistance. This reinforces other research findings which have illustrated how the quality of probationer-supervisor relationships can promote individual and behavioural change (Farrall et al., 2014; King, 2013a). Rex's (1999) study of 60 probationers found that those who changed their offending behaviour described it as active and participatory. The relationship with their probation officer was reciprocally driven to experience beneficial outcomes. Probationers perceived a sense of professionalism, encouragement, and obligation, which made them feel a sense of loyalty and accountability toward their supervisors.

By contrast, other studies have outlined the hindering aspects of probation supervision on individual outcomes. Drawing on data collected over six years in Michigan, Hoskins (2022) demonstrated that women on probation and parole faced

constraints on their agency. The female probationers faced several barriers to their endeavours, including a lack of tangible resources, which reduced their self-efficacy and limited their opportunities for success. Farrall (2002), in his study of 199 probationers, presented similar conclusions. Probationers perceived a lack of support from their probation officers to circumvent obstacles and, therefore, worked to overcome such constraints on their own accord. Similarly, in Fernando's (2021) comparative study of 40 English and French men, the English participants described their experiences of probation supervision as 'passive' and lacking resources to address individual concerns. A common finding suggests that positive change and improvement in desistance processes stem from a person's desire and motivation to initiate change rather than relying on support or interventions received directly from probation services (Farrall, 2002; McCulloch, 2005). King (2013a: 147) showed that probation had an 'impact on the early development of new, pro-social identities' but tended to have less of a positive impact in supporting people with specific social and personal issues.

Studies have drawn attention to the effectiveness of probation supervision and practices. Critical scholars of desistance advocate for more prospective-oriented accounts of probation supervision, focusing on individual strengths rather than past deficits (Maruna et al., 2004). The risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model has become the dominant framework in offender assessment and treatment delivery due to its effects in reducing reoffending. Despite the impact of the RNR model, Padfield (2019) argues that the risk paradigm, which has dominated the language used in resettlement services and practices, can frustrate or inhibit desistance intentions and processes. Probation is highly managed on release, and discussions are centred around risk-based practices and regulations that are closely monitored

from within the prison environment and into the community. Halsey's (2016) parolees in South Australia were significantly regulated with constant surveillance. Aspirations to live a law-abiding lifestyle and abstain from criminal activity were contested by the interventions and resources employed by social control agencies to manage the 'risk' of reoffending effectively. There was a disparity between personal needs and institutional offerings. The young men narrated that such needs were vital to aid their desistance but stood in tension with the approaches used by authorities to regulate their risk levels.

One of the implications of risk-based discourses and practices is that individuals may be stuck in 'circuits of exclusion' (Rose, 2000: 215, 324) where 'exclusion itself is effectively criminalised such that individuals cycle from probation to prison because of probation violations, from prison to parole and back to prison because of parole violations'. Potential desisters reach a point of 'f*** it, I might as well offend' when they feel themselves 'sliding towards old ways' yet cannot 'find timely and effective support' (Halsey et al., 2016: 1051) for their difficulties. Feeling trapped by the bureaucratic rules and procedures designed to support them, they see no way to cease their criminality and thus abandon their attempts to do so. 'Giving up crime is a fragile project....derailment in the desistance process rarely signifies the desire to reoffend, and more often equates to the loss of the practical and emotional capacity to desist' (ibid: 1041). Bottoms and Shapland (2019: 271) also remind us that 'desistance supervision does not lay aside risk or stop being aware of the public protection function of probation'. Individuals must contend with the demands of risk reduction policies and guidelines. At the same time, such regulations and practices often implicate aspirations to desist from crime willingly.

The body of literature on community supervision indicates that the primary focus underlying probation officer assessments is on systemic rules and licence conditions, rather than engaging in constructive processes of social and psychological change (Ward and Maruna, 2007). Alternative models of Probation Service, such as the Good Lives Model (GLM), promote tangible social and physiological factors that are viewed as valuable and essential to an individual's life (Burnett and Maruna, 2006; Maruna and LeBel, 2002; McNeill, 2016; Ward, 2002). Developing desistance-based approaches to probation has helped explore the relatively understudied concerns related to the early transition from prison to the community (Healy, 2010; King, 2013b). Building on this body of work, I will demonstrate in Chapter 5 how probation supervision and practices hinder rather than support men's and women's transition from prison to society. As I outlined at the beginning of this dissertation, my theoretical and empirical foundations align closely with a 'critical desistance' (Hart, 2017) framework, which promotes compassion and support rather than responsibility and risk surveillance.

VIII. Conclusion

This thesis examines how factors inside prison intersect with post-release outcomes. It analyses prisoners' experiences of resettlement and desistance as they transition from prison to society. My central argument is that desistance is a process through which people must navigate a series of transitional events that often co-occur as they consciously move away from crime and toward societal integration. Throughout this chapter, I have conceptualised 'transitional events' as structural factors external to the individual (employment and family ties) that support desistance endeavours. I have theorised 'conscious efforts' as individual factors

internal to the individual (identity reconstruction) that facilitate desistance from crime.

Determining how employment and family ties are connected to post-release outcomes offers an empirically rich framework to conceptualise *desistance in transition*. Experiences inside prison shape what happens to people after they are released. It is a mistake to conceive prison as a discrete, burdensome episode because it forms an extension of the pains and struggles that permeate the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men and women. From this vantage point, post-release support structures and programmes, whilst ostensibly designed to assist individuals in moving away from the criminal justice system, can unintentionally compound cycles of state intervention. While support structures may be presented as discrete from penal systems, they are often experienced as extensions of the carceral state.

This dissertation will build on critical scholarship by examining the intersections between prison studies and post-release outcomes in ways that elucidate how structural and individual factors inside prison influence resettlement aspirations and desistance from crime. I challenge the idea of incarceration as an isolated event. In this regard, the focus on prison pains and the impacts of incarceration is replaced by a broader conceptualisation of painful experiences and an examination of the interaction between these experiences of structural disadvantage and individual struggles inflicted over a sustained period.

Chapter 3

Methods and Sources

Researching people's experiences of imprisonment and their abstinence from criminal activity is not a straightforward task. The researcher faces various challenging responsibilities that must be navigated as the study progresses. Beyond managing the recruitment of a particularly vulnerable and marginalised group, who are often on society's fringes and difficult to access, you aim to make sense of significantly complex and usually highly traumatic life experiences embedded in 'messy' narratives. This chapter outlines the methodological framework and approaches of this thesis, including theoretical justifications and practical considerations. It details the research methods employed throughout, including the selected sites and sample choices. Conducting research within prisons presents several methodological challenges, especially concerning access to the prisoner population, procedures during fieldwork, and ethical practices. I explain the methods I employed to acknowledge and address these challenges. Additionally, the data collection and analysis processes are discussed before concluding with ethical reflections on my fieldwork.

I. Research Methodology

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, I adopted an interpretive approach to prisoners' lived experiences. From an epistemological perspective, the interpretivist tradition is fundamental to qualitative research. Neale (2021: 38) defines this approach as:

‘...constituted through individuals and groups and their interpersonal and collective beliefs, experiences, events, actions, and interactions.

Since this world is experienced, interpreted, constructed, and reconstructed by its members through their everyday interactions and evolving social activities, these are the aspects of social reality that need to be investigated and understood’.

An interpretive perspective aims to understand the subject matter ‘from the inside’ by viewing it through the perspective of those being studied. Qualitative methods are utilised to gain a deeper understanding of individuals’ accounts than quantitative ones (Bryman, 2016). As a research paradigm, qualitative inquiry mainly focuses on the various ways in which ‘people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them’ (Marton, 1986: 31). It requires us to ‘make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 3).

This study aligns closely with the ontological research stance known as ‘subtle realism’ (Blaikie, 2007; Hammersley, 1992). Advocates of this view believe that an external reality exists independently of our subjective beliefs and interpretations, and that it can only be understood through participants’ interpretations and our comprehension of their experiences. From this perspective, human subjectivity is seen as a dynamic social construct rather than a fixed state. The ontological perspective guiding this research enables access to the ‘inner logic’ of people’s lives (Laub and Sampson, 1998), making it well-suited for exploring the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals and their transition into society. The aim is to understand men’s and women’s realities in all their complexity and depth, and to interpret these narratives through their experiences and socially constructed meanings.

The qualitative interview provides valuable insights into experiences,

opinions, and attitudes (Denscombe, 2017; May, 2001). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher can exercise greater control with a prepared list of questions. The style tends to be more conversational than with fully structured questions. Focusing more on the interviewee allows them to expand on points of interest and respond with open-ended answers (Denscombe, 2017). This method enabled me to explore topics broadly while still retaining some control over the discussion.

II. Data Collection

This thesis is based on 69 semi-structured interviews with prisoners, conducted over a 16-month fieldwork period from March 2022 to June 2023. The sample consisted of 18 men and 12 women. Over the course of 16 months, I conducted 44 interviews with men and 25 with women. I interviewed the same group of people between one and three times during this period. In the first part of the study, I spent five months in two open English prisons to learn about people's experiences of incarceration shortly before they were released. In the second part of the study, I followed a portion of the same group of men and women into the community to understand their transition from open conditions to resettlement in society and post-release experiences. I then conducted two follow-up interviews. In the first follow-up interview, I spoke with 11 men and 7 women over seven months, beginning in June 2022 and ending in January 2023. These interviews were conducted three months after prisoners were released. In the second follow-up interview, I spoke with 15 men and 9 women over a period of seven months, from November 2022 to June 2023. These interviews were conducted eight months after prisoners were

released. From the initial 18 men and 12 women, I ended up with 15 men and 9 women.

After selecting the research methods, I needed to identify and gain access to the research population. The study population consisted of men and women serving custodial sentences in English open prisons.

1. Selection of Research Sites

There are currently 16 open prisons in England and Wales. Fourteen of them house men and two house women. Open prisons differ from closed, medium-high security prisons in many ways. The open facility incarcerates people who are in the latter stages of their sentence and are deemed low enough risk to reside in open conditions. These prisons are often part of a rehabilitation plan or resettlement regime for prisoners transferred from closed conditions. Prisoners are expected to complete their sentences with minimal supervision and security and are not locked in a prison cell. They can undertake employment, rebuild family ties, and access resettlement services. While there is limited information available on the characteristics of the population in each open prison, it appears that those in HMP Spring Hill and HMP East Sutton Park, where this research was conducted, represent a relatively standard range of ages, ethnicities, sentence lengths, and offence types. Prisoners in open conditions serve determinate sentences, and most are eventually released back into society. They spend the first half of their sentence inside prison and serve the second half in the community under the supervision of the Probation Service. I chose Spring Hill and East Sutton Park as research sites because prisoners were soon to be released, and I had access to this population once they were released from prison.

2. HMP Spring Hill

The research began at HMP Spring Hill. Spring Hill opened in 1953 as the first open prison in the United Kingdom in Buckinghamshire, South East England. At the time of my fieldwork, 213 men were housed in Spring Hill. Most were serving long-term sentences and had been moved from Category B medium-security prisons or Category C training and resettlement prisons to complete the final part of their sentence in open conditions. The population in Spring Hill reflects the profile of the typical prisoner demographic in closed conditions - predominantly white males between the ages of 30 and 50 and incarcerated mainly for offences against the person and drug-related crimes (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2022).

Like most open prisons, the regime in Spring Hill focuses on rehabilitation and resettlement. It is expected to support prisoners with employment, education, and vocational learning as they prepare for their release into the community. In partnership with external training providers, Spring Hill offers a range of qualifications, including IT, carpentry, plumbing, horticulture, and mentoring. The education department has connections with Milton Keynes College, Oxford Brookes University, and the Open University, allowing prisoners to attend courses outside the prison on a full or part-time basis. There are two main routes into employment. External employment is mainly offered through public and private sector initiatives, subject to appropriate risk checks. Once released, prisoners can secure work to gain formal accreditation and recognised qualifications to meet specific industry requirements. Those who choose to work on prison grounds are paid significantly less than others who obtain employment outside the prison. Most prisoners earn between £8 and £10 a week (Prisoners Advice Service, 2020). Most men I spoke with earned £10 a week, just under the national minimum wage (Low

Pay Commission, 2023).

The men reside in designated ‘huts’ containing around 18 beds. They can apply for a Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to undertake paid work or fulfil community roles to help them prepare for release. The prison contains a gym, sports field, library, and chaplaincy. Individuals are expected to strive towards becoming independent actors capable of taking initiative and demonstrating personal responsibility. Self-sufficiency is a normative requirement to overcome the obstacles prisoners inevitably face when exiting prison (LeBel et al., 2008).

3. HMP East Sutton Park

The second prison I visited was HMP East Sutton Park. East Sutton Park is an open prison and young offender institution (YOI) for women aged 18 and over in Kent, South East England. It is one of only two open prisons for women in England and Wales. East Sutton Park is situated in an Elizabethan brick house dating back to 1570, during the Tudor period. The prison first opened as a borstal in 1946 for young men, following the aftermath of World War II, and was later repurposed to accommodate juveniles and adult women. At the time of my fieldwork, 63 women were housed there. This number is broadly consistent with that of the other open facility for women, HMP Askham Grange, but significantly smaller than those of closed training and local female establishments. East Sutton Park and Spring Hill have more stable prison populations than would be found in local prisons, where the populations are far more transient. Expectedly, Spring Hill had a significantly larger prisoner population than East Sutton Park (just over three times greater).

Like Spring Hill, the regime at East Sutton Park emphasises rehabilitation and resettlement. Some education and skills-based programmes include

horticulture, catering, farming, and gardening. When writing this thesis, approximately a third of the prisoner population was in voluntary or paid employment outside the prison. Women can access Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), although, as in Spring Hill, this is subject to a formal risk assessment. Much of the population is granted ROTL for various purposeful activities, including paid employment. However, there were stark differences across the prison regimes. Spring Hill included programmes conventionally associated with men (e.g., carpentry, plumbing, brick laying) and emphasised tangible outcomes, such as accredited qualifications (e.g., working in the construction industry). By contrast, the women in East Sutton Park who worked within the prison were occupied with animals on the farms, while those in the community spent sustained periods employed in supermarkets, such as Sainsbury's, and attended courses in Barista skills. The opportunities were, therefore, to some extent, gendered in nature.

The types of paid work available to men and women were similar, primarily in low-skilled employment within the service industries (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). As we will see in the next chapter, the people I interviewed often criticised such roles for automatically placing them within the lower echelons of the workforce hierarchy, thereby increasing their chances of becoming minimum-wage, zero-hours contract labourers. Some of the people I interviewed had held managerial or specialist roles in the private sector before their incarceration, including roles such as asbestos removal managers, pub owners, or software developers. Such people did not have opportunities in prison that aligned with their previous employment backgrounds or future aspirations. As I will demonstrate, the jobs available in these open conditions served as temporary solutions rather than

contributing to long-term goals (Carlsson, 2012).

East Sutton Park houses its prisoners in three residential units: shared accommodation, single-occupancy rooms, and self-contained flats. In their spare time, women can access an association room, featuring a quiet area and a social space, where they can watch television, listen to music, and play pool. They can move with relative autonomy around the prison if they wish to visit each other's rooms or roam the gardens. There is also a gym, a library, and a multi-faith room for those who want to pray.

Several key factors lay behind my decision to conduct this study in open prisons. From an empirical perspective, there is limited knowledge of prisoners' experiences in open conditions, and I aimed to contribute to this literature base. I also chose to situate the research in these prisons because they are designed to facilitate a person's transition into the community. Since much of the scholarship on prison studies and desistance has focused on men's imprisonment and post-imprisonment experiences, I also chose to include women's accounts.

Finally, and in more practical terms, because open prisons accommodate men and women nearing the end of their sentences, they make it much easier to conduct post-release interviews with the same individuals once they are released. Regimes focused on resettlement were essential because they enabled me to explore key factors associated with desistance, such as employment and family ties. These regime aspects were examined to assess their influence on post-release outcomes, supporting the study's research aims.

4. Access to Research Sites

Several criteria must be satisfied when negotiating access to open prisons in England. The first was to gain ethical approval from the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). I submitted an application to the CUREC, which contained a detailed outline of informed consent protocols, approved research procedures, and ethical considerations to ensure the safety of everyone involved in the study. The process of gaining ethical clearance took around eight months. Once approval had been granted, I selected the research sites and contacted the relevant people. First, I required approval from the prison governors in each of the two prisons. The governors expressed a keen interest in the research and were enthusiastic to read the findings. In both cases, they were content to host the research. Once the governors' consent had been obtained, I sent an application to His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Committee (NRC). While the prison governor could grant access to the prison, the NRC was responsible for giving access to the research population. I was subsequently granted access by the NRC. However, due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to delay fieldwork for approximately a year, following government guidelines. To mitigate the impact of this delay, I held regular conversations with the governors to ensure I was kept informed of updates on COVID-19. Once the governors had decided to reduce the COVID-19 restrictions, I began my fieldwork.

5. Entering the Field

In contrast to most prisons in England and Wales, which have heavily guarded perimeters, barbed wire, and strictly controlled access, Spring Hill and East Sutton Park did not exhibit these characteristics. Each prison had a sign at the gate

promoting its focus on resettlement. My first impression of these prisons was that they looked more welcoming than the intimidating exterior of closed prisons.

The taxi drove into the main entrance of Spring Hill along a narrow rural road and into a small car park. Each visit, I was dropped off at the main reception area and staff were informed of my arrival. I then waited at reception to be collected by the custodial officer who supported me during my visit. I stored prohibited items, such as my mobile phone and laptop, in a locker. However, I was permitted to carry paper, pens, and chocolates. Security at Spring Hill was more relaxed than in closed prisons, where visitors are usually required to be completely stripped of their belongings upon entry.

During the initial visits, the prison officer assisted me in identifying suitable men for the study and accompanied me to their residential blocks, where I could discuss the research in more detail. Once I had recruited participants, I was given considerable freedom to carry out my research within the prison. I moved freely within and around the residential blocks, the canteen, the legal hut, where my interviews were conducted, and the custodial manager's office, my main point of contact. I was free to go almost anywhere at any time. Although my interview schedule depended on when the men were available, I could decide which days to visit and when to leave each day, a privilege not extended to the general prison population.

Researchers conducting fieldwork often have to adapt to their environment. They may experience shock or find navigating a new social setting overwhelming as they strive to understand and settle into unfamiliar surroundings. I knew nobody in Spring Hill. Therefore, my perception of how others would view me was shaped by my outsider status. Because of this, I expected to encounter some suspicion.

There were many occasions when groups of men, standing and talking outside their blocks, would glance at me. When discussing my research in the residential social rooms, people who were not eligible to participate would walk in to listen and ask questions. I wandered unescorted, dressed casually, without a 'visitor' lanyard around my neck. Some people would say, 'I didn't know you were doing research. I thought you were one of us!' Even when I started to wear the lanyard, which read 'visitor', men approached me and curiously asked what I was doing in Spring Hill. There was a genuine interest and appetite to understand who I was and what I was doing as I walked around the prison. I felt safe and at ease navigating the environment unescorted. A big part of this comfort was that everyone I met, whether interviewees or staff, was friendly, respectful, and helpful. My presence was significant in some ways, regardless of my outsider and privileged status. The staff perceived me as a professional engaged in a novel research project that could help the institution improve the prisoner regime. Getting approval and support from the governor was crucial in ensuring a smooth interviewing experience, as it prompted staff to support my fieldwork needs. For prisoners, I showed genuine care and determination to do a 'good cause' and help others understand what it is like to be in their position. Although I was an outsider, my research and university credentials gave me a certain status. Some men believed I could 'get their voices out there' and 'improve the regime'. These comments inspired and motivated me during fieldwork in Spring Hill.

Although the DPhil was primarily an academic pursuit, my professional experience in the civil service also shaped my research aims. My role as a policy official sparked an interest in how penal policies are implemented and experienced by those affected. For example, I was eager to understand the idea of meaningful

employment opportunities. Conducting fieldwork in open prisons allowed me to observe the benefits and limitations that such opportunities offered to men and women nearing the end of their sentences.

My first impressions of Spring Hill were positive. Walking unescorted within the prison, I felt very relaxed. The feeling of being at ease and not having to worry about my safety made it easy to forget I was in a men's prison. On one of the interview days, I received an apology letter from one of my interviewees stating that he would no longer participate in the study. Usually, the prison staff would notify me of any changes to the interview schedule. An alarm had occurred within the prison a week before, when I was in Spring Hill. All prisoners on site were sent back to their rooms. I thought I was witnessing a fire safety drill. The participant described in the letter that the alarm had been triggered for an altercation in which he was involved. He was assaulted by another prisoner and sustained injuries. That same day, he approached me to apologise in person. He explained in the letter that he was in no physical or mental state to participate in the study. I completely understood and thanked him for taking the time to write the letter. It was evident from his face that he had suffered severe bruises and cuts. This encounter reminded me that, despite my positive perceptions and experiences of Spring Hill, I was still doing research inside a penal establishment, where violence remained part of the prison culture.

In my spare moments, I tried to soak up and record all the intricacies of the encounters I had in detail, jotting down as many remarks as possible in each conversation. I spent most of the days interviewing prisoners, meeting with many of them on more than one occasion and following them into the community to understand their post-imprisonment experiences. From the outset, I sought to build

rapport with them. However, it was only sometimes possible. Some people understandably keep their distance, especially in prison, where trust, confidence, and respect take time to establish. Nonetheless, most who agreed to participate in this project were forthcoming and keen to support the research. Between interviews, I wandered around the prison, speaking to people, particularly in the canteen, or catching up with those I had met before. I responded to light-hearted comments, such as ‘You’re still here!’ by showing my curiosity and diverting attention from myself toward Spring Hill. In these moments, I realised I had ‘entered the field’.

At the same time, I knew that entering the field came with certain privileges that my participants did not have, so I always respected their boundaries. Even during the interviews, I ensured that when I asked follow-up questions, sought clarification, and posed additional questions, my questions did not distort or influence participants’ accounts or experiences, thereby ensuring that my assumptions about the prison system and Probation Service did not affect their responses. Perhaps more importantly, I intended to mitigate the impact of my status as an academic researcher who could leave the establishment at the end of each day on the narratives of interviewees. I ensured that I greeted participants as they walked around the prison. More extended conversations sometimes followed this. There were a few occasions when I saw some of my participants in the cafeteria. In these instances, I asked them how they were doing and would occasionally bring up some of the points they described in their interview. For example, one man was waiting for a job outcome in preparation for their release, so I asked him whether he had heard anything from the employer. This demonstrated that I remembered the details of our interview and showed I had a

genuine interest in the person's life. Generally, interviewees were impressed that I could recall many details of our conversations. Being outside the interview room without the dictaphone ignited a more 'casual' dialogue, perhaps making individuals feel at ease. My deliberate attempts to treat my participants as ordinary people helped me develop common ground with them and minimise the researcher-researched dynamic.

I first visited East Sutton Park in October 2018. This was a profound experience. Not only was I visiting a women's prison for the first time, but this trip took place before the NRC approved my research. The governor at the time described the visit as 'exceptional'. My job in the civil service at the time helped me build a connection with him. Following several discussions about my research, he was content to facilitate my visit. I felt privileged that the most senior official in East Sutton Park was picking me up from the train station to take me to the prison. We discussed various topics during the car journey, mainly related to my research. The governor highlighted some potential 'tricky' questions the women may ask and how I would respond. For example, 'Where do you work'? What first sounded like a simple question had potentially contentious undertones. Being a civil servant and having ties to the governor may have evoked a sense of affiliation with the Prison Service or a criminal justice agency. Throughout my fieldwork, my response was one of transparency, and I stated that I was not working in the Prison Service. I was a researcher and student at the University of Oxford. The governor wanted reassurance that I could adapt to a complex and high-tension environment where opinions can be divided, and that I would manage specific encounters effectively. I felt more prepared after this conversation.

East Sutton Park was the opposite of what I imagined a low-security women's prison to look like. It was a large, prestigious-looking building overlooking a farm with many acres of land. As I glanced around the surrounding rural area, I asked the governor, 'Is this the prison'? I thought I was walking into royal headquarters instead of a women's prison. The governor accompanied me to his office and discussed the plan for the day. I conducted a small focus group with six women from diverse backgrounds and age groups. The purpose of the focus group was to explain my research, answer any questions about the study, and gain insight into the prison. The discussion was lively and sometimes turned into a debate about the regime. I allowed the conversation to flow, as it provided a better understanding of some of the issues and themes I could explore in my research, before shifting my focus back to the topic. I left with a better understanding of the prisoner regime and what life was like in East Sutton Park.

After the focus group, a few women encouraged me to join them for lunch. I was surprised by the invitation, but I welcomed the opportunity. I was the only male waiting in the lunch queue and was met with glancing eyes. I waited to be served and proceeded to the food hall. I quickly noticed that no staff were present as I entered the room, which contained around 50 women. As curious faces looked at me and groups talked, I felt acutely that I was roaming unfamiliar territory. I felt somewhat alien, inhabiting a personable space inside the prison. I walked alongside one of the women to find a seat, only to be told by another woman that the space was taken, even though it was not occupied. The tone was not aggressive but came across as intentionally assertive. I could feel the tension among the women, but I remained calm. This woman asked who I was, what I was doing in the prison, and what the research was about. I felt this was one of the 'tests' the governor alluded

to earlier about managing situations. This encounter felt like an interrogation, but I remained polite, respectful, and mindful that I was sharing an environment where I would not ordinarily cohabitate. As I walked to the other side of the food hall with one of the women, teasing comments were exchanged across the hall: ‘Who’s your new friend’?...’Is that your toy boy’? My lunch experience provided a rare insight into what life is like in a women’s prison and put into stark perspective the power dynamics that manifest in these establishments.

Following lunch, the woman I was with gave me a tour of the prison. I went into the social room and walked around the prison landings. A staff member escorted me to several types of residential dormitories to give me a sense of the space and conditions of accommodation within the prison. I did not want women to feel I was invading their privacy, as I was met with very surprised yet intrigued faces. I joked about the sense of ‘seeing enough’ of women’s rooms and returned to the main visiting area. The governor dropped me off at the train station and looked forward to welcoming me back to begin my fieldwork. I had some interesting conversations and learned a lot from this experience. I was grateful for all the support and effort that went into accommodating my research endeavours. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to postpone fieldwork for approximately a year. By the time I returned to start fieldwork, all the women I spoke with had been released, and the governor had moved on.

While my experience in the lead-up to fieldwork at the women’s prison was overwhelmingly positive, my experiences once I began fieldwork at East Sutton Park were quite different. Unlike Spring Hill, I worked with a much smaller population and spoke with women throughout most of my visits to the prison. I signed in at reception on each visit and had a room booked for the interviews. I

stored prohibited items in a locker and carried my paper, pens, and chocolates. I was met with more suspicion from the staff and felt somewhat unsettled. I had no working relationship with the new governor, nor was I given the chance to meet her in person. This meant I often had to arrive at reception and explain the purpose of my visit. I also had to outline my plan for the day to staff members, as the people I was in contact with were often away when I arrived. Logistically, fieldwork in this prison was more challenging and less organised than at Spring Hill. I felt my presence was seen as a burden rather than an opportunity to support research needs. I entered the prison each time with a slight nervousness that I might have to make an extra visit if something went wrong, which was beyond my control.

I spent less time introducing the study to the women, and most of the recruitment was handled by the prison officers. This meant I did not have the opportunity to meet all interviewees face-to-face about the study, as I did in Spring Hill. Instead, information sheets and consent forms were sent to women, and if they were content, they signed the forms, with staff notifying me of their willingness to participate. During the early visits, staff helped identify eligible participants and arranged interviews. I had less freedom to move around the prison, perhaps because of my gender, which might have prevented me from accessing certain areas. Also, since I had not met the governor in person, I could not establish a relationship. As a result, I lacked the same level of autonomy and freedom of movement I had in Spring Hill.

The most I could do was complete the interview and then move on to the next one until the schedule was finished. This process was repeated for most of the fieldwork at East Sutton Park. In Spring Hill, I could submit requests to the staff, and a system was in place for when people dropped out. Part of this difference was

undoubtedly due to the smaller population size in East Sutton Park. Still, as the governor did not ask the staff to support my research needs, I often had to complete tasks independently from certain staff members. Therefore, I approached staff members who were more proactive and willing to help.

In these encounters, I kept field notes to ensure I had a record of everything I observed and experienced, which would supplement the interview data. These notes included my thoughts on the dynamics and challenges of interactions with staff and ideas for things to do or people to seek out during later visits. I also noted issues that may have been relevant at the analytical stage. Entering the field was an immersive and eye-opening experience. I learned a great deal. Below, I describe the study's sampling approach and the inclusion criteria used to select participants.

6. Sample Selection

This research is based on 69 semi-structured interviews I conducted in England with 18 men and 12 women over 16 months. Given the available resources and the challenges of conducting research across multiple prisons, I considered the sample size appropriate for several reasons. Qualitative researchers tend to rely on smaller samples because of the rich data they produce and the resources required (Mason, 2002). The study was exploratory, aiming to identify common themes and understand their connections rather than establish definitive causal relationships. Denscombe (2017) states that research in the social sciences typically uses small samples (between 30 and 250 participants). Therefore, the number of interviews conducted aligns with the standards of a small-scale qualitative study.

I adopted purposive sampling, a criterion-based approach to select participants directly relevant to the research aims (Bryman, 2016; Ritchie et al.,

2014). This sampling strategy is beneficial and common in qualitative research. To ‘craft an appropriate range of cases’ (Neale, 2021: 111), I included a variety of prisoner experiences within the open prison estate. I believed that to understand accounts of prison life and the process of transitioning from imprisonment into society, those who had experienced these processes were best suited to share their stories. For this reason, I used a theoretically informed sampling method to recruit participants. To qualify, participants had to be aged between 18 and 65, be in an open prison, and be within six months of their release. Since I was interested in prisoners transitioning into the community, I needed men and women nearing the end of their sentences. This criterion was shared with case administrators in each prison, who helped me identify eligible individuals. Once identified, I spoke with them in small groups about the research and answered their questions. Due to limited time availability and support from prison staff, these group discussions were not feasible in the women’s prison.

Negotiating initial prison access involved direct communication with the governors and the NRC. All subsequent contact was with each prison’s custodial manager and case administrator. I relied on front-line staff to arrange interviews and fulfil other administrative duties, such as booking rooms and responding to participant information requests. The governor’s vested interest was vital in ensuring my experiences at Spring Hill were positive. I met with the governor of Spring Hill on my first visit. I discussed my research and explained how the findings would benefit Spring Hill. From that point, two custodial managers were encouraged and tasked to support my fieldwork requirements. This encounter put into perspective how the exercise of power from those in positions of authority can influence positive outcomes.

Matters at East Sutton Park were quite different. I had to prompt staff to complete administrative tasks and schedule interviews. As Neale (2021: 89) writes about the importance of building and sustaining relationships with research participants, ‘the cornerstone of ethical practice in a qualitative longitudinal study’, this process of rapport development is equally important before the recruitment stage, as it allows for meaningful and professional relationships to be established with the gatekeepers, which, in turn, facilitates a smoother research experience. In the end, it was just Spring Hill’s staff that proved fruitful during fieldwork.

Most people who agreed to participate in the study took part in the research. I identified some common motivations for involvement. Some individuals showed a genuine interest and curiosity in the study. These people were enthusiastic and asked extra questions about the project. They were more vocal about their experiences and had much to say about the prison regime and the criminal justice system more generally. This initial curiosity about the research was vital, as it gave me more confidence that these individuals were determined to complete the interviews, even after being released. In the men’s prison, I would often get asked: ‘Are you at Oxford Brookes or main Oxford’? Perhaps part of this question stemmed from the fact that Spring Hill has a partnership with Oxford Brookes University. Nevertheless, I felt that there was a prestige factor for some of the men, as they felt privileged to participate in the research. Most men and women thought I was there to listen to them and was ‘on their side’.

Interviewees were not initially paid for their time. I did not want them to participate solely for monetary gain but because they were genuinely interested. I clearly stated in the information sheet that participants would not receive financial compensation for their time. There were instances where I spoke about the research

to groups of people in the social room of the men's prison. Holding discussions in this kind of setting, which was primarily intended for those interested in taking part in the research, attracted other people because the social room was an open area available to all men residing there. There was one instance where a man who was not part of the group came into the room and asked probing questions about the financial benefits of the research: 'You writing books, yeah'? I responded: 'This study is for my university degree. I want to get your voices heard. I want to publish the research'. He replied: 'But like you're going to make money out of this'. I wanted to be transparent about how I planned to use the data and not create a false impression in front of a group of potential participants, so I said that 'most of what will be published will be academic articles I don't get paid for'. Unconvinced with my responses, he said, 'I know people make money from these things, so I'm not interested'. Even though this person was not part of the group that came in to hear about the research and ask questions, I remained polite and said, 'Ok, no problem, that's your choice', before parting ways.

I anticipated some difficult encounters with the men in Spring Hill. I stayed calm, polite, and respectful. However, at the same time, I kept a firm stance and showed some grit. I did not want participants to think of me as a 'pushover' or as someone who would 'crack' under pressure and scrutiny. I aimed for them to see me at face value as someone professional, genuine, and capable of maintaining my composure. Nonetheless, I was concerned that interacting with the man who accused me of profiting from other people's stories might discourage others from taking part. Those fears helped me clarify my research intentions in subsequent conversations. I understood his concerns to go beyond just hypothetical financial gain. He challenged me to consider the task I was asking participants to undertake,

which involved providing sensitive and personal information that would benefit my study, but might not benefit them.

Throughout the interviews, some men raised concerns about other financial issues, like the privatisation of the prison system. Mohammed, one of the interviewees who had been serving a long sentence, explained what he had observed in his 21 years spent inside prison:

These companies come into the prison and hire prisoners on low basic wages to benefit their companies. It's not to benefit you. Building prisons is done by contracts and deals made in parliament. It makes money for the government because it creates jobs. I've been in prison for a long time, so I've seen the system for what it's worth. There will be genuine people in certain places, whether in probation or prison, who will try to make a difference. But it's not enough with 95% of people playing the game. (Mohammed)

His words serve as a stark reminder of the scepticism many incarcerated people hold about prisons, the programmes within the prison system, the people who facilitate them, inspection reports, and officials moving in and out of prisons. Many prisoners, especially those serving long sentences and who have experienced changes within the system, mistrust the prison and probation services. Like the man who refused to participate in the research, Mohammed made it clear that people coming into prison to promote their services are seen as being there to meet broader incentives that are often financially or performance-driven, rather than to help those confined. When the individual refused to take part in my study because he believed it was for financial gain, I openly explained to the group the purpose and main objectives of the research. I emphasised that, first and foremost, I am a student working on a university dissertation, but also that the study aimed to give their voices a platform in the public domain. I clarified that the study would not change or overhaul the open prison regime, managing their expectations. Instead, it aimed

to highlight potential areas for improvement within the system, which they could contribute to and which would be read by practitioners in the criminal justice sector. I also stated that, while a summary of the findings would be shared with these groups, the primary focus was to explore their lived experiences in open conditions and their journeys towards resettlement into society.

While I did not intend to financially incentivise participants to participate in the study, I thanked them for helping me with my research. After the final interview, I gave them a thank you card containing a gift voucher. I wanted to reward individuals for their time, so it seemed appropriate to express my gratitude after the interviews. People generally seemed altruistic rather than financially motivated to participate in the study (see Williamson et al., 2014). They felt they were being listened to, and I had genuine care and interest in their experiences. After their release, a few men I spoke with stated that prison officers had encouraged them to participate in the project as it would 'look good on them'. This means that a small proportion of my sample was potentially biased towards those who prison officers felt had exciting stories to tell and with whom they had good relations. While I did not find this to be the case with women, conducting research within a criminal justice setting, such as prisons, may be susceptible to such biases.

Given the small scale of the study, I did not match the sample according to specific variables such as age, offence, type of sentence, or length of sentence. While these characteristics provided background information for contextual purposes, trying to recruit participants by placing them within such restrictive criteria would have put unnecessary restrictions on already limited numbers. They also did not seem relevant to a study primarily concerned with how and why desistance unfolds. I adopted the same rationale as Maruna (2001) did in his

research. Like Maruna's work, my research is not intended to form part of the prediction-based criminal careers literature:

‘....these background variables provide little understanding about how desistance occurs and tell us even less about how policy can encourage it. Trying to explore the impact of these independent variables in a small study like this would only confuse the effort to understand desistance as a developmental process’ (2001: 49).

As I explained to the prison staff, I was conducting an exploratory study into people's experiences of resettlement and desistance, rather than conducting controlled experiments or survey-based research. Consequently, the inclusion criteria for the research, apart from the purposive sampling criteria already mentioned, were very flexible.

7. The Research Participants

Limited information is available on the characteristics of the prisoner population in Spring Hill and East Sutton Park. However, I provide a breakdown of the demographic details of the 30 interviewees who took part in my study below.

8. Sociodemographic Characteristics

Altogether, I conducted 69 interviews with 18 men and 12 women. The participants ranged in age from 23 to 64 years at the beginning of the study, with an average age of 40. This figure reflects the 30 to 39 and 40 to 49 age categories, comprising just over half of the prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2023a). The average age of men in this sample is 39 years, compared to 43 years for women. The dominant ethnic group in the sample was white (67%, n=20), with women constituting a third of all white individuals. There was more ethnic diversity among

men, although similarly, the most extensive makeup was white (56%, n=10), followed by Asian (33%, n=6). The interviewees' ethnicities are consistent with the sentenced population, with white prisoners representing 73% of the population (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024b).

9. Criminal History

The study participants were serving prison sentences for a wide range of offences. Those related to drugs (27%, n=8) and grievous bodily harm (17%, n=5) were the most common, accounting for nearly half of the offences committed. These attributes are consistent with the recent increase in these offences (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024b). Drug offences were more prevalent among men, of whom 88% were convicted for these offences. By contrast, women were mostly convicted for grievous bodily harm (25%, n=3) and fraud (25%, n=3). Women were incarcerated for a broader range of crimes than men, including arson, cruelty and indecent exposure. Certain types of offences varied by ethnicity. For example, men of Asian and Black ethnicity accounted for 86% of drug offences, and women of white ethnicity accounted for 75% of violence against the person. These figures are broadly consistent with recent trends in ethnicity and crime. For example, Ministry of Justice (2024c: 1) data shows that the most significant 'proportion of convictions for white defendants was for violence against person offences (25%), while the largest proportion of convictions for all other ethnic groups combined was for drug offences (28% to 36%)'.

The sentences of the people ranged from 1 year to 19 years. The shortest sentence for men was just under three and a half years, and the longest was 19 years. For women, the shortest sentence was one year, and the longest was ten

years. Participants served an average sentence length of just over six and a half years. The men served an average sentence of just over eight and a half years, while the women served an average of 4 years. All participants were serving fixed-term determinate sentences and had served half of their sentences inside prison. Most female participants were first-time offenders (83%, n=10), while more than half of the male participants had committed at least one offence before serving their sentence (61%, n=11). Men had more of a history of incarceration, with 28% of them sentenced to at least ten years. There were no recalls to prison once individuals were released to complete the second half of their sentence in the community. This finding is at odds with recent trends, which show an increase in the recall population (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024b).

10. Semi-Structured Interview Design

As I was interested in the process of desistance from crime, I wanted to understand people's experiences or what Toch (1969) defines as their 'self-project'. I adopted a similar approach to Maruna (2001) and Vaughan (2007) to grasp the concerns that mattered most to individuals. The semi-structured interview was selected as the appropriate qualitative data collection method. It allowed interviewees to provide open-ended answers for deeper, critical insights into the 'why' rather than simply giving descriptive accounts of the 'what' (Bryman, 2016; Denscombe, 2017). The resulting narratives are actively generated; 'they are not simply "out there" in a realist sense, to be "harvested", "mined" or "collected" from participants as if they are passive stores of knowledge' (Neale, 2021: 192). As Garland (1992: 419) has argued, criminology has been blamed in the past for tending 'to generalise, to stereotype, to reduce, to objectify, and to silence human beings who fall under

its gaze'. This interview design enabled me to document the experiences of men and women transitioning from prison to society, as well as the factors that helped them reinstate their lives and become part of the community.

Dey (2007: 92) reminds social researchers that 'methodology is work in progress rather than an abstract and ossified set of technical prescriptions'. I wanted to construct participants' lived experiences as they unfolded, to go 'backstage' (Tunnell, 1998: 231), and generate rich, in-depth narratives. I interviewed the same group once they had been released from prison to understand their experiences of resettlement and desistance. Rather than seeking to understand their accounts retrospectively, I adopted a prospective, forward-looking approach to minimise the likelihood of reconstructing and improvising past events. In contrast to studies on desistance based on retrospective interviews, I employed a qualitative approach to examine how factors associated with desistance helped people integrate into the community, rather than focusing on specific interventions or 'problems' that led to their incarceration. While the nature of individual offences provided contextual information about participants' backgrounds and helped us understand how they described certain events, restricting their accounts to their offence would encourage recollections of their crimes retrospectively and limit our understanding of how they could turn away from crime. Therefore, the methodological frame I employed in this dissertation responds to the call for further research into the post-imprisonment context to be more prospective, considering the adverse circumstances many formerly incarcerated men and women face (see Kruttschnitt and Bijleveld, 2016).

In both prisons, interviews were conducted in a quiet, private room, with custodial staff absent. On two occasions, I told prison officers that their presence

was not required. In East Sutton Park, a female officer stayed in the interview room; in Spring Hill, a male officer sat outside the room. These officers were assigned to help me on the day, but were unaware they could leave me to conduct interviews alone.

While most people initially agreed to participate in the research, there were a few cases where they dropped out at the last minute. I arrived in the morning for one interview only to be told by staff that the man who had previously agreed to meet with me ‘was not in the right state’ and could not be involved.

While the semi-structured interview is a flexible research method, I prepared an interview guide containing specific questions under several broad, conceptual themes. I began with preliminary questions about the person, such as their name, age, offence, sentence length, how long they had been in prison, how long they had left, and whether this was their first time incarcerated. I asked men and women to describe their lives before they were imprisoned. This approach was pragmatically, rather than theoretically, driven. I wanted to understand their diverse backgrounds and get to know them better. I did not want the people I was interviewing to view me as another outsider, like many criminal justice officials with whom they interact and who often interrogate them with questions to satisfy institutional demands. I, therefore, deliberately chose to use a conversational and informal tone to create an environment conducive to building rapport and enabling individuals to express their narratives in dynamic ways rather than simply stating facts (Guenette and Marshall, 2009; Ritchie et al., 2014). This approach helped people describe their accounts comfortably and gave them more control over the dialogue. My student status and inexperience as a researcher made interviewees at ease and less wary of being judged.

The first part of the interview guide aimed to collect demographic information necessary to supplement the interview data. The remainder of the interview guide contained questions designed to focus on the themes related to the research aims. Interviews covered the same topics: adaptation to prison life, staff-prisoner relationships, employment, education, identity and self, family ties, and plans for release. I would follow up on certain responses and probe their accounts, highlighting specific points of interest to explore in more detail. I covered some of the same topics from the first interview in the two follow-up interviews. I also explored the most critical themes of men's and women's transition from prison to the community, as well as the factors that helped them integrate into society. Follow-up interviews covered the same themes: resettlement, probation, housing, employment, education, finances, identity and self, family ties, and plans for the future.

Nobody showed distress or discomfort while sharing their experiences during the interviews. Protecting respondents from any emotional harm that the research questions might cause was a priority. Once they were released, some began to show more emotions related to their past experiences. I interviewed one man in a coffee shop who found it difficult to talk about his daughter, with whom he lost contact while in prison. After a quick recalibration, we moved on to discuss another topic. Another encounter I had was with a woman I interviewed a second time. She had found employment immediately after her release and received a promotion. I told her, 'you have achieved so much in so little time... you should be proud of yourself'. She started to shed a few tears but quickly composed herself. I had built rapport with these two individuals. Since I had witnessed their departure from prison, I felt I was 'going on a journey with them' in some ways. These men

and women felt more at ease discussing matters that were particularly important to them with me. Some of them openly shared their experiences during the first interview, but, as I expected, most felt more comfortable expressing themselves after leaving prison. This meant that interviews conducted after release were, on average, longer than those held inside prison.

I informed the interviewees that the two follow-up interviews would be conducted at a location of their choosing and their convenience. They took place in various community settings across England, often near where participants lived. They were mainly held in coffee shops. When face-to-face interviews were not possible, these were conducted over the telephone. Some people's contact details were missing when they were released from prison. I then contacted their probation officer to obtain the relevant contact information. After completing all the interviews inside the prison, I kept a contact point at each prison. This was useful when I needed the probation officer's details to contact the participants. However, once prisoners were released, contact with prison staff and the Probation Service was minimal. Many of the men and women involved in the study expressed gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to share their experiences.

Generally, I found building rapport with interviewees in person to be easier than doing so online or over the phone. Over time, I felt I could observe and gather a sense of what it was like to be in their position. Although I had the freedom to walk away and go about my daily activities without any restrictions, I felt that I was learning more about the impact of the prison and probation system on people's lives. Conducting interviews allowed me to establish relationships with some participants, although not with all. While a few of them openly shared their experiences from the first interview and perhaps even, to my surprise, shared more

than I anticipated, there was a shift in the volume and intensity of men's and women's accounts in the follow-up interviews. In the post-imprisonment interviews, most participants shifted their tone and felt comfortable sharing deeper and more personal insights into their complex lives. Conducting interviews in people's homes likely helped participants feel more at ease. A key element that enabled rich data collection was the building and maintenance of relationships throughout the fieldwork. I did not underestimate the importance of soft skills in fostering rapport. I listened attentively to the men and women during the interviews, maintaining eye contact, nodding at specific moments, and showing care and interest. As Nina expressed: 'It's nice to be able to talk to someone interested in your life and has no agendas'. Others, like Nina, seemed to value the chance to speak to someone unaffiliated with the prison and Probation Service who was genuinely interested and cared about their lives. Being compassionate and respectful towards my participants meant recognising them as individuals first, not merely as participants.

III. Data Analysis

I transcribed the interview data from a digital dictaphone and transferred it into Microsoft Word documents. I used automated software and manual transcription in this part of the process. While manual transcription was more time-consuming, it enhanced the quality of transcripts and enabled me to formulate a more coherent picture of the data and associated themes. Interpreting data on respondents' experiences of imprisonment and desistance was essential. As I attempted to build a picture of their efforts to rebuild their lives, I felt it was necessary to get 'close to the data' and not lose sight of the context. As I had conducted all the interviews, I

was best placed to contextualise narratives about individuals' lives before, during, and after imprisonment. This contextualisation was necessary because I was interviewing people on multiple occasions. I felt a manual data coding method was most suitable for these reasons.

I ended up with several hundred pages of interview transcripts. The transcripts were read multiple times, and the most pertinent themes were extracted into a separate document. A participant profile document accompanied each transcript and thematic review. I repeated this process for the three interview waves, forming the 'interview file', which contained the qualitative documents for each participant. Once thematic documents were compiled, I transferred this data, including demographic information, into Microsoft Excel to manage and organise the data. The themes covered in the interviews formed the theoretical framework of the study.

1. Qualitative Interview Analysis

In pursuit of a rich and authentic description, the analytical frame for this study is based on the thematic approach. Thematic analysis is suitable for understanding themes and patterns within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It provides greater depth to focus on generating themes most relevant to the research aims. Once interviews were transcribed, I identified connections and patterns in the data, which generated emergent themes. Smith et al. (2009: 92) describe emergent themes as 'a concise and pithy statement of what was important in the various comments attached to a piece of transcript'. The transcript themes were characterised by participants' narratives and my conceptual interpretation in linking their narratives to the relevant strands of criminological literature. Given the temporal nature of data collection, these emergent themes were dynamic, cumulative, and recurring.

For example, the theme of employment featured across all interview stages and was framed in terms of employment aspirations, trajectories, and pathways.

The interview transcripts followed a process of ‘open’ and ‘axial’ coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to identify several conceptual themes and patterns in the data. These themes have been merged using a form of open coding. For example, participants who described limited work opportunities inside the prison identified employment as an emergent theme. These patterned categories were refined, discarded, and merged to depict the relationship between themes. They were integrated into key broad headings (e.g., staff-prisoner relationships, employment, family ties, and so on). Once themes were identified, I revisited the literature on those specific themes to establish connections, simultaneously circling back and forth between the data and theories from the literature. Axial coding helped me to condense these broader themes into smaller, coherent themes from the initial subset of the data that were most relevant to the entire dataset, which was then organised thematically. For example, experiences under the theme ‘probation’ highlighted unnecessary restrictions, so I identified ‘licence conditions’ as a relevant sub-theme. At the same time, this type of focused coding enabled me to discard information that was not pertinent to the research aims and was shared across multiple transcripts, thereby further refining the data. Thus, while the first part of qualitative data analysis applied a deductive approach to theorising participants’ experiences in relation to the literature, these broader themes were modified and extended to accommodate partial, more focused sub-themes identified inductively.

Once I had transcribed and coded the interview transcripts, I analysed participants’ narratives iteratively after completing each interview wave. For

example, after interviewing men and women at Spring Hill and East Sutton Park, I began observing their employment experiences inside prison. After the final interview, I analysed participants' work experiences post-imprisonment to document how continuities and dissonances in people's experiences emerged at various stages as they transitioned from prison to society.

I have made minor revisions to some direct quotations used in the findings to enhance readability. These revisions include removing speech fillers (e.g., 'uh' and 'ah'), modifying language where it may obscure meaning, connecting parts of long quotations where interruptions detracted from the participant's point, and making minimal grammar adjustments. The findings from the interviews will be presented in the following chapters: Chapter 4 (relationship between prison work and post-release outcomes), Chapter 5 (resettlement challenges under probation supervision), Chapter 6 (desistance as a transitional process), and Chapter 7 (future goals, aspirations, and new beginnings).

IV. Ethical Considerations and Procedures

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, I took extra care to ensure that all participation in the study was based on informed and voluntary consent. I explained the details of the research project and the expectations concerning their involvement to each participant before they took part. I understood that some prisoners may have literacy issues. In these instances, the study details were explained orally. Where this was not possible, for example, when I did not have the chance to speak to the women, I ensured they had an opportunity to ask questions before the first interview to check if they understood what was required. All individuals received an information sheet before consenting to the interview,

ensuring they had sufficient information about the proposed study. I did not want people to feel pressured, so I stated that they did not have to decide immediately after receiving the information sheets and were given several weeks to make up their minds about whether they wanted to participate. Individuals were reassured that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without being penalised. I answered questions about the study openly and frankly to give an honest account of the research process. Once I had covered all the formalities, each person was required to sign a consent form, indicating that they were content to participate in the research and had given their full and free consent. This informed consent was treated as a fluid, ongoing process, and interviewees were periodically reminded at each stage of the interview if they were still happy to continue being involved.

I also altered all identifiable features to ensure anonymity and protect participants' confidentiality and privacy rights. I created pseudonyms for each person to conceal their identities. These pseudonyms are used in the thesis write-up. I reviewed the data and removed any facts or statements that might have inadvertently revealed the individual's identity. Names and their corresponding pseudonyms are stored in a password-protected spreadsheet, which only I can access. Complete anonymity in prison research is not achievable due to the presence of gatekeepers and the fact that prisoners are often called to the interview room. Nevertheless, the interviews were conducted privately on a one-to-one basis, without the presence of prison officers. Participants were assured that all data and subsequent outputs would be anonymised to safeguard their identities.

V. Leaving the Field

While beginning fieldwork was exciting, leaving the field presented mixed emotions. As Liebling (1999) noted many years ago, researchers may feel satisfaction, discomfort, or fatigue after interviewing prisoners. I felt a sense of accomplishment completing all the interviews. However, saying goodbye to some participants with whom I had built a rapport was difficult. A few people wanted to keep in touch and were interested in reading the ‘final product’. Others expressed a desire to remain in contact, but I did not hear from them subsequently, and some had no intention of keeping in touch. For those with whom I stayed in contact, I emphasised that parting ways was not a permanent goodbye, but rather an opportunity to stay in touch.

Following the final interviews, I reached out to all the participants to check how they were getting on and took the opportunity to update them on my progress with post-fieldwork plans. I did not want this interaction to seem as though I was ticking a box, so I ensured that I followed up on any commitments I had made. For example, one of my ambitions for the DPhil and my promise to participants was to publish as much empirical material as possible. I have shared every journal article I have published with participants who featured in them (Khan, 2023a; 2023b). Most thanked me for contacting them and were happy I got in touch. Some of those cited in the articles provided me with positive feedback. They furthermore expressed appreciation and gratitude for checking in on them. Some reciprocated and asked to meet up for coffee and dinner. I said I would happily meet them once I completed the DPhil.

VI. Terminology

There is variation within criminological literature regarding which terminology

ought to be used when describing incarcerated people. The terms ‘prisoner’ and ‘offender’ are commonly used in prison and probation research. However, these are perceived as deeply loaded and disrespectful labels with negative connotations. Within this thesis, and in line with my philosophy, I primarily refer to the participants in my study by their pseudonymised names. To vary the terminology throughout the thesis, I adopt the terms ‘person’, ‘man’, or ‘woman’, and when referring to a group of people, I use the words ‘men’ and ‘women’. Occasionally, I use phrases such as ‘participants’ or ‘interviewees’. The use of ‘prisoner’ or ‘offender’ is kept at a minimum and is only referred to in the literature or where using other words is difficult. However, this terminology is not intended to be derogatory, but rather descriptive. In considering the ‘politics of representation’ (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009: 13), I have ensured care is taken to describe my interviewees as ‘people’ rather than ‘offenders’, the latter a label which can often be used somewhat misguidedly to distinguish this group within society from others in the general population. I advocate a humanist terminology that is aligned with a rehabilitative ethos and which serves as an important reminder that men and women who have been incarcerated are, first and foremost, people and should not be simply reduced to their stigmatised labels as ‘offender’ or ‘prisoner’.

VII. Researching Desistance: Concluding Reflections

My research on people’s experiences of resettlement and desistance raises several ethical considerations. I emphasised ‘reflexivity’ (Neale, 2021) as an ongoing, meaning-making process throughout the study, even though Crewe (2014: 401) caustically reminds us that ‘the writer is the least important person there’. From an ethical perspective, I became acutely aware of a common power imbalance within

the prison environment. Although I was able to steer the direction of the interview, the interaction with participants was reciprocal, as I regarded them as experts in their own experiences. Some men and women, especially those serving longer sentences, demonstrated a strong willingness to inform me about their lived realities, which I did not share. Such interactions are founded on ‘relational ethics’, rooted in mutual respect, dignity, and remaining true to a person’s core values.

While I have endeavoured to stay true to my ethics and ideals while following all formal ethical procedures, the longitudinal nature of researching a vulnerable population meant that this study had to make some compromises. Exploring desistance ‘from below’ can place significant pressure on ethical and safeguarding standards and practices (Wacquant, 2010). I did not aim to push the research scope to its absolute ethical and methodological limits (see, for example, Goffman, 2014; Venkatesh, 2008). Instead, I was aware that to truly understand life with individuals labelled as ‘risky’ or ‘dangerous’, I needed to put myself in situations where my participants felt comfortable. For instance, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, some interviews took place in participants’ homes, which could blur the boundary between research and friendship. In these cases, I maintained professional standards and practices while allowing for flexible decisions when individuals felt more at ease in their home settings.

Tunnell (1998) suggests that to experience ‘backstage behaviours’, a person needs to adopt a ‘backstage approach’ in their research endeavours. Similarly, Lyng (1998: 221) argues that ‘many important empirical and theoretical problems taken up in the social sciences can be thoroughly and honestly studied only by placing oneself in situations that may compromise safety and security in a normative or corporeal sense’. Bourgois and Schonberg (2009: 14) recognise this

‘anti-institutional transgressive potential’ of research ‘because, by definition, it forces academics out of their ivory tower and compels them to violate the boundaries of class and cultural segregation’. In criminological research, this temporality of the space created between researcher and participant facilitates a glimpse of life from their shoes.

The interviewer’s position in qualitative research is paramount in evaluating the data collected (Sexton, 2015). I was made acutely aware of how power issues are connected to understanding the subjective experience of punishment. For example, during one interview, one of the participants stated that he had been called to interview shortly before he was scheduled to leave the prison to start work and was instructed by the prison staff to go to the legal hut, where the first interview took place in Spring Hill. He explained that he had been given another date and time for the interview. We subsequently rescheduled the interview. Other participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to share their opinions and personal experiences as they perceived them, rather than as described by prison authorities or the state, through this study. These two diverging perspectives highlight the stark reality of my power within the prison and the very real effects it has on the individuals I was interviewing.

I have explained and justified the various decisions and procedures of this study. The methodology details how I conducted the research, the multiple sites where the research was based, the challenges I encountered, and how the data was collected and analysed. I have provided a comprehensive outline of the methodological framework and approaches used in this thesis to enhance transparency throughout the fieldwork process and reduce the risk of obscurity in understanding the findings.

Over the following four chapters, I present the main findings of the research. I have aimed to honour people's vested contributions in my pursuit of 'rich' and 'authentic description'. In doing so, I hope this qualitative study is sufficient to honour its aspiration and commitment to shed new light on social justice issues, criminal justice policies and practices.

Chapter 4

The Relationship between Prison Work and Post-Release Outcomes

I've spent 21 years in prison. All these inspection reports and nothing. You're putting more money into the system and jobs, but nothing for us. It's more for the system. If you do what they tell you, which is of no benefit, you become the mere mortal of yourself, the product of this environment. You will not be the same person. You can do more work in an open prison, but what you can do is within their means. That's the road they want you to go down, not the road you want to go down. I told them I'd rather make it alone than what you're offering me.

I got a job with one of my mates. I'll work with him on gas safety, and he'll teach me everything he knows, like an apprentice. I got that job myself. I've had to talk to a friend. Nothing to do with the prison system. I'm not saying they don't help you, but it's not what you want to do after many years in prison. DHL worker, delivery driver....It's not what I will stick to. It's mundane. It's not enough money.

Three months after being released from prison

They've told me a few weeks before release, we'll help you find a job. They do a 10-minute conversation. I'm not saying it isn't good because they help some people book the interview. But they don't offer you the jobs that you want. They say this is what we've got. There is a little bit to get you to a job, but they don't follow up a year later to see if these people are still in that job, where they go off, or what is not working. Instead, they've put a tattoo on my leg. Every step of the way, I've had hurdles and obstacles. I should have had help to get the job I wanted.

(Mohammed, Spring Hill)

This testimony is from Mohammed, a 40-year-old man released from HMP Spring Hill. Mohammed was one of the people whose journeys I followed from prison. He was incarcerated at Spring Hill for seven months before he was released into the community to serve the remainder of his sentence on licence. Mohammed had been in and out of the prison system since he was 15 and told me that he had not

seen many positive changes within the prison regime since he was first sentenced in the late 1990s. Like others whose narratives I bring to light throughout this chapter, while in prison, Mohammed complained of precarious labour, low wages, and a lack of transitional support. Consequently, when he left prison, he sought employment without the help of prison and probation services: ‘I have equipped myself, and I don’t need to rely on anyone’, he said. ‘The world isn’t helping you. You got to help yourself’.

Criminological research has shown that successfully holding down employment is a pivotal turning point in the life course transition (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993) and one of the most critical factors in helping individuals move away from crime (Farrall, 2004). Yet, despite theoretical and empirical developments in the field of desistance (for an overview, see Hart and van Ginneken, 2017), scholars have paid less attention to men’s and women’s experiences and the impact of employment inside prison. The body of work exploring internal matters within the prison (Crewe, 2020; Crewe et al., 2017; Liebling, 2004; Sykes, 1958) rarely explicitly addresses how these issues are connected to post-release outcomes (although see Cracknell, 2023; Rennie and Crewe, 2022; Ugelvik, 2022). We know little about the transitional experiences of people like Mohammed once released into society. Do they stay in the same job once they leave prison? What is the relationship between their prison work and what happens to them when they are released?

In this chapter, I address these questions by analysing men’s and women’s work experiences in two open prisons and their accounts of how it shaped their post-release outcomes. To set the context, I begin with an introduction to how prison work is deployed in open conditions. Following this, the empirical sections

are split into three parts. In the first part, I argue that, despite recent governmental efforts to increase meaningful employment for prisoners, there is little regard paid to people's prior work experiences. Most are subjected to poorly paid, precarious work regardless of socio-economic status. In the second part, I focus on their post-release employment experiences. I illustrate that a lack of preparation and planning for release leaves many prisoners independently seeking alternative employment as soon as they leave prison. In the third part, I explain how men and women overcame the difficulties of securing employment. Even though most participants were in paid work, they continuously sought ways to reduce the effects of their criminal label and associated stigma. I conclude the chapter by discussing the implications of the relationship between prison work and post-release outcomes in the broader resettlement context for men and women transitioning from prison to society.

I. Prisoner Employment and Resettlement

Employment serves multiple purposes for individuals who are incarcerated. It can be used to gain work experience and develop practical skills, earn money, and prepare for release into society. While every type of prison in the United Kingdom offers some form of unpaid or paid work, employment opportunities should increase as individuals progress through their sentence. Preparation for release is an essential function of the prison regime and one of the criteria used by the HM Inspectorate of Prisons to determine a 'prison's health'. Employment is crucial in supporting people's transition into the community, promoting effective resettlement, and facilitating desistance from crime. Individuals are 'encouraged

and supported to prepare and progress to employment on release’ (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023: 43).

In open prisons, men and women can apply for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to work outside the prison. ROTL is regarded as a ‘key part of any reintegration strategy’ (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023: 56). To seek employment in the community, individuals must submit an application for assessment by prison staff. They are also expected to provide their curriculum vitae and cover letter for job consideration. Applicants undergo an interview, and if successful, they are offered the job in accordance with the sentencing terms and guidelines of the Prison Service.

Career fairs and advertisement boards inside the prison list available jobs. Opportunities to work have been promoted due to the increased number of employment hubs and the recruitment of additional employment advisors (Ministry of Justice, 2022b). Building stronger links with employers and ‘bringing together essential information and services in the form of a Resettlement Passport’ aims to ensure ‘prison leavers can lead crime-free lives’ (Ministry of Justice, 2022b: 9) and reduce reoffending.

While the government is committed to helping individuals leaving prison become ‘work-ready’, the prison ultimately decides which jobs to assign to them. Individuals can seek employment independently. However, due to police, health, and safety checks involved, the external route into employment takes considerably longer than securing work within prison. Therefore, although working in the community is more financially appealing, some people work in prison because it involves less bureaucracy and may help reduce the hurdles they face upon release.

In Spring Hill, ‘prisoners are encouraged to find employment’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2022c: 1) through accredited community training placements or jobs inside the prison. The ‘working out’ scheme allows prisoners to work outside the prison on a voluntary and paid basis. Spring Hill ‘provides opportunities through companies with ongoing relationships with the prison, such as Chef Direct, Green King and DHL’ (ibid). Similarly, East Sutton Park has ‘a range of community-based employers offering work to women, with some of them including large national companies’ (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2024: 32). Individuals can also work within the prison in areas such as horticulture and catering (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024c). The government’s White Paper (Ministry of Justice, 2022b: 9) sets out expectations on employment: ‘a presumption that all offenders will be offered the chance to work in prisons, on ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence), and once released to increase job prospects’. The Prison Service emphasises building stronger links with employers to give people leaving prison a better chance to abstain from crime. The government has invested in ‘more meaningful employment opportunities in prisons and setting prison leavers up to secure jobs’ (Ministry of Justice, 2022b: 10).

While criminal justice policy has aimed to improve job prospects for prisoners, I found that the roles available were mostly low-skilled positions within the service industries (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). These jobs, situated at the lower levels of the workforce hierarchy, tend to reinforce social disadvantage and increase the chances that people will be pushed into minimum-wage, zero-hours contracts (Bosworth, 2023). Over twenty years ago, Maruna (2001) observed that such low-skilled, routine manual labour often conflicted with individual aspirations. Most people in these prisons, including those I spoke with, had clear

ambitions and goals for their future. However, the jobs available in the open regime were seen as temporary solutions rather than long-term career options. Although interviewees may have been overly optimistic about the jobs they could secure while incarcerated, this did not stop them from trying to find more meaningful employment or explore whether they could use the rehabilitative opportunities of the open prison to access ‘more meaningful employment opportunities’ (Ministry of Justice, 2022b: 10).

The government has recently implemented HMP Academies to support prisoners’ employment prospects. These are spaces inside prisons led by employers who train people for employment on release. In the United Kingdom, Timpson is a well-established HMP Academy that recruits and trains individuals in their services. The New Futures Network is another example that enables employers to visit prisoners before they are released, allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and skills. This scheme encourages employers to identify individuals who would be a good fit for their company. It also offers prisoners the opportunity to receive essential training before being released and joining an employer. In short, the government has encouraged more people leaving prison to enter employment, primarily to reduce reoffending. The number of formerly incarcerated individuals successfully securing a job within six months of leaving prison has doubled, from 14% to 30%, since April 2021 (Ministry of Justice, 2023c). While the Prison Service supports employment pathways for prisoners during their incarceration, this responsibility is transferred to the Probation Service once individuals are released and serve the remainder of their sentence in the community.

Most prisoners in open conditions are paid for the work they do. The majority earn between £8 and £10 a week (Prisoners Advice Service, 2020). The men I spoke with mostly earned £10 a week. Women's wages varied depending on their jobs, ranging from £1.20 to £4 daily. In both cases, the amounts paid were significantly lower than the national living wage (Low Pay Commission, 2023), but higher than the weekly minimum pay rate for other prisoners, which is £4 (Prison Service Order, 2020). Prison wages are exempt from deductions, so individuals keep all their earnings. Employment outside prison is subject to different terms. According to the Prisoners' Earnings Act (1996), 'prisoners who are undertaking paid work in the community and earning more than £20 a week may be made subject to the imposition of a levy amounting to up to (and including) 40% of their remaining earnings' (Prison Service Instruction, 2016: 2). The prison applies this levy alongside other mandatory deductions, such as income tax and national insurance contributions. Levies are paid to 'voluntary organisations concerned with victim support or crime prevention or both as may be prescribed' (ibid). This was an area of concern for the people I interviewed.

Despite efforts to enhance employment conditions in the open prison estate, there is tension between the government's claims that work is rehabilitative and how it is perceived as exploitative. The roots of carceral labour are predicated on the notion that frames the prison as a *political project* (Wacquant, 2009), where the underlying intention of penal policy is to 'discipline vast swathes of low-wage and surplus migrant labour and as a tool to divert and expend native middle-class anxieties of a socio-economic nature' (Xenakis and Cheliotis, 2018: 4; see also Cheliotis, 2017; De Giorgi, 2006; Melossi, 2015). A close examination of Wacquant's (2009) work reveals neo-Marxist interpretations of the symbolic role

of elite forces in relation to suppressed minorities within the cultural domains of capitalist society. As I will demonstrate, some prisoners reject working as a drone for capitalism and actively make decisions to avoid becoming institutionalised by their neoliberal ideologies, which prioritise fulfilling institutional aims (Garland, 1996).

II. Precarious Work, Temporary Solutions, and Low Wages

Most of the people I interviewed had been working full-time before they were incarcerated. Their employment histories were diverse, ranging from self-employed businesses to roles in the public sector. Those who were self-employed mainly started in family-run businesses before moving into other positions. Some of these family businesses included a taxi service and a restaurant. Although most prisoners have limited professional qualifications and education, a few of those I interviewed had secured 'good stable jobs'. These included managerial and specialist roles in the private sector, such as an asbestos removal manager and an IT technician. One man had worked as a mechanic, and another woman had been involved in recruitment.

Imprisonment not only deprived these people of their jobs but also replaced them with precarious and low-skilled work. The people I spoke with who were incarcerated for the first time had higher-income jobs than those who had been in prison before. They also tended to be younger. Sarah offered a good example. She said she had grown up in a supportive family with peer networks, finished school, and always had 'reasonably good jobs'. 'I had never got in trouble before,' she told me. 'My offence is dangerous driving. I had a car accident with my best friend, and she passed away. I was also pregnant at the time and lost the baby'. Before the

accident, which led to her imprisonment, Sarah had enjoyed her life managing an asbestos removal company. Having held down a stable and well-paid job, she had been surprised and frustrated with the limited employment opportunities made available to her at East Sutton Park:

The jobs they have in here are absolutely crap. Greggs, for God's sake. It's not something I would ever dream of doing. I won't turn my nose up. I'll do the job, but it's not me. If it were me, I would find something transferable. They say you can find your job, but it will take three months to do police checks and two months to do health and safety, so you end up saying fuck it, I'll just take whatever.
(Sarah)

Opportunities to work in the retail sector existed but were primarily characterised by mundane, standardised, and routine labour. For people like Sarah, such roles differed from what they intended to pursue upon release. Yet, they felt they had little choice but to accept them, given the bureaucratic hurdles to securing alternative jobs outside the prison.

Abdul had similar concerns. Like Sarah, this was his first prison sentence. He also had previously enjoyed a stable career. He grew up in the West Midlands before moving to the South-East of England when he was five. He finished school and became an IT technician. Despite the emphasis placed on the importance of paid work in sentence planning and government policies, he pointed out that the options available were no more than a temporary solution:

If you look at the prison jobs, they're mainly in warehousing and construction. The quickest job for me would be DHL, which is warehouse work. But it's just a job. It's not a career. That's the difference. (Abdul)

Sarah and Abdul described career-defining goals and future aspirations that they set out to achieve. They did not wish to waste time securing jobs in sectors they

would not pursue once released from prison.

For Mohammed, however, matters were somewhat different. More than a decade older than Abdul and Sarah, he came from a lower socio-economic background. Growing up, he had few support structures, no school attendance, and no formal qualifications. For several years, in and out of prison, he had made do with a variety of jobs, getting support from his partner. The one thing he shared with the two younger participants was that he, too, had been offered precarious work in prison:

They will give me agency numbers and book interviews for DHL factory work. It's not a job I want. It's not a job I stayed in prison for nine years to do. It's not a job I will stick to. (Mohammed)

Open prisons are designed to help prisoners find employment, supporting their preparation for release and ultimately integration into the community. While paid employment was mentioned as a central factor, Mohammed complained that the employment opportunities were 'pre-packaged' as part of the regime rather than individualised to support his transition into the community. Standardised vocational training and precarious work offered by third-party agencies superseded individual needs at the expense of supporting post-release ambitions. Mohammed was acutely aware of the neoliberal forces underpinning the options he was being offered:

You have more ways to do an electrician or plumbing course, but it's only what the prison allows. It's within their means of what they allow you to do [...] You're putting more money into the system. More people are getting jobs. We are a cash cow for them. Why? Because it makes more money for them. (Mohammed)

Older people who had been incarcerated before tended to be more opinionated

about the prison system than those serving their first sentence. Mohammed believed the options he was offered would be of little benefit. They seemed to meet organisational goals rather than being designed to cater for resettlement or preparation for meaningful employment on release. They held little appeal. When I interviewed Mohammed, I observed that he wanted to remain loyal to his values. He rejected the prison system's economic levers and its false story about the redemptive power of work.

Others I interviewed took a more positive view, arguing that prison jobs generated potential avenues for the future. Although most people avoided roles they perceived as mundane, a few undertook any paid option to increase their chances of securing work post-release and, as Duncan put it, 'in case it was needed outside'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the participants who benefited most from prison work had no employment record or qualifications. Tony came to the United Kingdom from Africa when he was three years old. He learned English and Maths in school, but claimed he was not the smartest. Tony went to college but dropped out in his first year. He was raised by his grandmother, who died some years later. Tony separated from his partner, with whom he had two sons. Living a turbulent life, Tony had never held a job and resorted to crime to support himself financially. While he initially seemed to dismiss the options available to him in Spring Hill of working on the farms and gardens as 'rubbish', he also believed that it could prepare him for life outside prison:

I was picking up leaves and putting them in bins [...] But I was lazy where I came from, so when I got to Spring Hill, I was amazed because it prepared me for the outside. I won't do well outside if I can't get up in the morning and go to work on time. I've never worked, so I've learned how to wake up in the morning to go to work.

(Tony)

Like many people in prison, Tony had grown up in disadvantaged circumstances with little social and financial support. Despite the limited nature of his work in Spring Hill, Tony did his best to turn mundane tasks into opportunities to establish a routine and prepare for post-release employment. For most people with limited support structures, any work was accepted as it gave them a sense of purpose and realisation that work could be obtained in the future. The fact that people like Tony believed that securing work was a possibility is a positive outcome, as it instilled hope for potential employment routes. Put simply, individuals had a choice to work or not to work. However, to get a 'good job', individuals had to demonstrate greater personal responsibility.

Nina was different from the typical prisoner in terms of demographic background. She had studied Law at university and had hoped to become a barrister. She had never been placed in detention in school, she said. Working hard her whole life, Nina 'didn't think she would ever come to prison'. As one of the few participants with university credentials, Nina participated in a range of jobs both inside and outside the prison:

When I first arrived, I worked on the farms because I knew it would be an experience I would never have. I've cut piglet teeth and bottle-fed lambs. I worked as a nail volunteer briefly because it was the only job they would give me that wasn't cleaning. I worked in the mental health team and supported people with mental health issues. (Nina)

Among those I interviewed, individuals with higher educational attainment set greater expectations and standards for themselves. They also accessed some of the prison's best and highest-priority jobs to comply with the regime. Their success often hinged on banal achievements. An unscathed driving record, for example,

was a significant benefit: ‘Not many people have a clean license [...] They always need drivers, so they push everything for you because they’re desperate’ (Nina). The ability to become a driver for the prison not only expedited release beyond institutional walls but carried greater individual responsibility: ‘You drive people to the train station or hospital and do random things like deliver blood to the doctors, or they give you money to drive to Morrisons to get bread’ (Nina). Such responsibilities required but also generated a certain degree of institutional trust. It improved staff-prisoner relationships. Those, like Nina, who were proactive and self-governing, were rewarded within the open regime. Personal responsibility and independence were vital in securing better jobs:

I haven’t had much sleep in the last six months. Staff were concerned about my hours, but I was fighting to get to the city because I wanted a good job, and no one else would do it. I had to do it. (Nina)

Active engagement with the regime was understood to be essential for expediting release and increasing the likelihood of securing employment amid rising living costs and inflation. Nina was determined to live in the city and needed to work beyond the average person’s weekly hours to afford her costs. Being accountable for her actions and working hard had a profoundly positive impact on her experience of imprisonment. The contrast between Nina and Tony’s labour suggests that the same types of people are always rewarded - the more educated and socio-economically advantaged - while others continue ‘picking up leaves’ (Tony) on prison grounds and telling themselves that things will be better when they are released (Wacquant, 2009).

Managing life responsibilities independently is essential in the open prison. Individuals are pushed to make rational decisions and self-manage behaviour if they wish to be released on temporary licence (see Crewe, 2011a; Shammass, 2014).

In other words, passive compliance in open prisons will only get you so far. Prisoners are expected to engage in purposeful activity, such as undertaking work, and behave autonomously to mirror experiences in the outside world. The open prison thus demands individuals to take accountability for their actions and become independent actors who can shape their future goals (Crewe, 2011a; Foucault, 1977; Garland, 2001).

People tended to cite two factors when I asked what could be improved about prison work. As we saw above, most people aspired to gain more meaningful roles. Furthermore, everyone wanted a fairer wage structure with reduced levies. At the time of writing, the men I interviewed made a weekly average of £10, while women earned £20. Minimal earnings were exacerbated by the hard manual labour that men and women carried out to earn their wages. Their workload was particularly overwhelming and perceived as unjust. Before imprisonment, a few men were used to this arduous physical labour. Tyson, a 50-year-old man with three children, lived with his mother on a farm. He had worked seven days a week doing liquidation, repossessing cars and houses, and cleaning containers. Tyson had enjoyed a good quality of life and tried securing a similar kind of job inside prison:

I was going for a job in a container yard for £60 an hour. They said you're not doing that for five grand a week. It seems they don't want you to earn more money. Things are so slow here that it will take six months to sort stuff out. You need to get things done by Friday, but by the time you put the app and get it back, it's too late [...] Prison will give you slave labour. They get us to do all the shit work and pay you a shit wage for you to do the work of 50 people. (Tyson)

Employment in the community left individuals with minimal savings because of the prison's 40% levy on their income. The wage distribution needed to be more consistent with the labour produced. This levy was experienced as double jeopardy

for prisoners already subject to ordinary income tax and national insurance contributions. There was a stark difference in how salaries were paid to men and women just before they were released. While the men were allowed to keep all their earnings for the last three months, women were given their sums only in the previous month before their release. Perceptions of unfair treatment of salary earnings were common, but gaining an income was particularly important for women leaving prison to live independently. Nina argued:

People should be able to work sooner. It's not just about the fact that you're out in the real world and earning money, but that you're actively doing something for when you leave, which was huge for me because I was going to live by myself. Earning that money was important because it was like make or break [...] But because they take a percentage of your wages, you have to work for 60 or 70 hours instead of 40 to earn an average wage.

The pay cut for those employed had a cumulative effect, resulting in additional working hours to compensate for the deduction in weekly earnings. As Nina's words made clear, pre-release planning and preparation were significant in ensuring that post-release goals could be achieved. Living alone meant that it became essential to ensure savings were put aside, particularly for independent women like Nina, who had minimal family ties and relied on a sole income accumulated from wages in prison. Contrary to a recent study which showed how prisoners' employment histories before imprisonment influenced their wages inside prison (Maycock and McGregor, 2023), I found that wages were uniform for the people I interviewed, irrespective of their previous employment and socio-economic status. The ability to continue paid employment after prison was among the most critical factors in participants' narratives.

III. Post-Release Employment and Outcomes

Many of the people I spoke with felt they had not been adequately prepared for their release into the community. There was insufficient planning to help them transition from prison to society. People like Tyson acted independently of the prison and probation services to secure work. He was adamant about returning to his maintenance job in a container yard, but the only way he was going to achieve this goal was through his own efforts:

The prison system is not there to help or guide you. All the work I've done has been off my own back. The system is there to keep you down, so you have to work your ticket. I'm emptying six containers. They come off the boats onto the lorries. The lorries go into the container yard, with 1000s of them. I drive a 30-tonner forklift and move stuff about. I'm emptying stuff, loading vans, and selling stuff. It's constant. I'm paid good money. (Tyson)

Given the limited support, individuals used their contacts to obtain work that they perceived as desirable. Despite the increase in people securing work on release (Ministry of Justice, 2023c), this trend overlooks the types of jobs people obtained and the duration of their employment in the same job. I found that people like Tyson, who actively pursued work related to their interests and longevity, most often secured work through their pre-prison contacts and experience rather than because of the employment, training, and education they received inside prison. Many people I interviewed did not consider their prison work as a means to help secure employment upon release. They did not trust the prison and probation services to help them integrate into the community. A similar sentiment was shared with Abdul, who, with his employment background in IT, felt that his job on release was a temporary solution to finding more long-term work:

My job is in compliance. They've started to make me train people, which has given me confidence. But I don't want to be in compliance

for too long. I want to return to what I was doing before prison: working in IT software. (Abdul)

Returning to the same employment was difficult. This was partly due to having a criminal record and the lack of meaningful work, which prompted individuals to secure long-term jobs on their terms. Those with previous work experience found it easier to obtain employment post-imprisonment than those without a work history or qualifications. However, many mentioned the need to self-regulate their actions and behaviour meticulously to secure better jobs. For people like Tyson and Abdul, post-release employment was not just aimed at supporting their resettlement into the community. It concerned self-respect in exercising control they hoped to gain through work. They wanted to regain control of their lives and, in doing so, adopted a 'technique of neutralisation' (Sykes and Matza, 1957) to prove that they were good, reliable workers and not criminals. The aspiration for control was often linked to the prospect of earning a living, reasserting their position in society, and taking back control from the Prison Service, which dictated the work opportunities in prison.

Most men I interviewed secured employment immediately after being released from prison. By contrast, just over half of the women were unemployed at the same point. Women encountered other post-release difficulties, such as securing housing, which hindered their ability to seek employment. Most women were single and could not draw on financial support from husbands or romantic partners. Other contextual factors impacted their ability to find work. For example, unmet housing needs restrict women from seeking jobs, as employers often require a fixed address. Only a few of the women I interviewed prioritised post-release employment.

Aspirations to secure meaningful and relevant work continued to be of fundamental importance. Mohammed, who expressed that he would not participate in DHL work while in prison, maintained the same ethos once released:

The Sainsbury's and DHL jobs are dead jobs. You can't be stacking shelves that long. You'll feel life's unfulfillment. You think you want better. You feel ashamed to tell someone what you do. You're getting all these jobs, and these companies come into prisons and hire prisoners on low basic wages to benefit their company. It's not to help you. They think, at least he's got a job. We're giving him something. No. I didn't even go down that road. I went my own way.
(Mohammed)

After leaving prison, most of the men I interviewed successfully found more meaningful work that aligned with their previous employment and interests. Mohammed fulfilled his goal of becoming a qualified gas engineer, working six days a week and earning a salary. He envisaged a long-term goal to work as self-employed: 'Once I get that qualification that's under my belt. I don't need anyone. I need customers so I can market myself and go self-employed. You've got to help yourself'. When I asked participants about their future plans, most mentioned developing their work experience, becoming fully qualified in their particular trade, saving money to lead a better life, and supporting their families.

I found that the most financially comfortable individuals had been self-employed before imprisonment and returned to the same jobs on release. While self-employed men experienced some financial reassurance, economic self-sufficiency before imprisonment did not necessarily indicate post-release financial stability. Ryan ran his own car business before he went to prison. Coming out of prison was a process of returning to his work, rebuilding the customer base, and promoting his services:

I've gone straight back to what I did before, such as running my business. It's frustrating to start from the beginning, but it is what it is. I've always enjoyed working in this trade. I've done this trade for so long, so it's not like I had to start a new trade. I'm getting busy. I already need a bigger garage. I know it will be fine in a few months, even if I struggle with space. You just got to get on with it. (Ryan)

Not surprisingly, those I spoke with were poorer upon release than before their imprisonment. Although he was busy working and attracting customers, Ryan worried that he was essentially starting his career from the beginning. He lost his clientele, which meant having to readvertise his business and regain momentum. Despite this setback, he believed that even if he had worked during the COVID-19 pandemic, he would not have given up and would have persevered through the difficulties endured during the national lockdowns. 'In my head, they can lock the locks, but they can't stop the clocks', he said confidently. Despite the lack of pre-release support and the structural barriers they faced when leaving prison (Farrall et al., 2014; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011), there was hope for a better future.

When I asked participants what work meant to them and the quality of life they hoped it could provide, most emphasised their finances. While the majority sought to put their experiences of imprisonment behind them, some tried to apply the knowledge and experiences they had gained inside prison on release. Jessica had started a master's degree in creative writing in prison, for instance, and finished it, gaining a distinction after being released. She wanted to use her education and experiences in prison to secure a job in a criminal justice setting:

I am doing some voluntary work and would like to work for charities that support female ex-offenders. I am only applying for jobs where I can be a fruitful contributor. I want to get my masters working for me. I have so much to give, but at the same time, I'm not desperate to get any job. I'm now in a better place to do something that I love. There is a good possibility that the voluntary work I am doing may

become a registered charity. I am keen to work in a charity, and who knows, maybe a few months down the line, we'll get some funding and eventually do something good. (Jessica)

For Jessica, the prison served as a site for reflection, provoking a changed mindset about the kind of work she wanted to pursue upon release. When I asked her what motivated her to pursue a career in the justice voluntary sector, she revealed a passion for helping marginalised and under-represented women. The hardships and struggles she experienced ignited her appetite to improve the system for the greater good. Among the women, I observed elements of confidence and belief that they could 'beat the system', proving to others (and thus to themselves) that they could improve their lives and create a new, positive future. I found this especially pertinent among Jessica and Nina, who had university degrees. They were adamant that they would leave prison to improve their quality of life because of their qualifications, experience, and educational background. Nina had similar intentions to use the knowledge and insight she gained inside the prison to secure more relatable work:

My job is ok. I make money, and that's great, but I don't care about the job. It's not what I want to do with my life. I've been promoted. I ask for things, and I get them. But in the least narcissistic way, I think I can do so much better than this. I needed time to think about how I felt about it. I feel like, because it's been seven months, I need to do something with what's happened in my life. (Nina)

As mentioned earlier, Nina aspired to become a barrister before she was incarcerated. Following her imprisonment, however, she decided to move away from her Law degree and hoped to utilise her experience within the prison system, but 'more on the people side'. Due to financial pressures and the high cost of living in the city, Nina resorted to working a temporary job to cover her bills and

expenses. Shortly after her release, she secured employment independently and was promoted to a full-time estate agent position. Before leaving East Sutton Park, she saved as much money as possible to live in privately rented housing. While earning money was essential to meet her needs, Nina had longer-term plans to transition her experiences into a career aligned with her passion for social justice. I sensed economic pressure from Nina's post-release experience, a 27-year-old single woman residing in an expensive city with minimal social and financial support structures. Jessica was 64 years old and had peer support and economic security. Therefore, I observed less urgency throughout Jessica's narrative in getting a job. However, what they both had in common was an appetite to transform their experiences into future careers.

I spoke with one interviewee who indirectly worked with a criminal justice agency following her release. Fiona was one of the few participants who maintained her prison job on release. At 23, she was one of the youngest participants in this study, working in public sector recruitment for five years within a construction company. She took the opportunity inside the prison to work for a private-sector recruitment company. Fiona was among the few who obtained a role inside the prison that aligned with her previous employment background and interests. Nine months after she had been released, she worked for the same company but in a new area, focusing on project management:

I've been doing project management, which I've never done before. I'm working on diversity and inclusion projects. It is recruitment-focused, but I spend a lot of time explaining the business to people. It's great meeting all these different types of people. I'm going to do a project management qualification. This is the sort of thing I wanted to do. I need to capitalise on this opportunity. (Fiona)

Fiona described her post-release employment in a positive light. This experience

stemmed from her interests and the opportunity to work towards her long-term career aspirations. Relatability, motivation, and scope for progression were essential factors in considering the appeal and longevity of employment pathways for women. Even though Fiona secured an enjoyable role, she often had to contend with her moral outlook:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] But if I can make a difference in someone's life by giving them a bit of a head start, then that's how I have to look at it. My morals aren't going to pay the bills, and you have to capitalise where you can, especially when you come out. I have to be realistic. I don't have a magic money tree in my garden, so I have to do what I have to do. (Fiona)

When I probed Fiona on what she meant by morals in the workplace, it became apparent that her decisions involved balancing what she deemed valuable in life with what the organisation was doing to achieve its aims. Decision-making was rationally calculated to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of the working environment. At the same time, she was acutely aware that she would not have to deal with the politics of the business, given her starting position within the company. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Whereas Nina and Jessica had intentionally described their desire to work in social justice, Fiona's position was an indirect outcome of the circumstances in which she found herself. When I asked Fiona about her future intentions of working in her organisation, she explained that her tenure was a long-term commitment. However, as she said boldly, 'the day

when the job goes against 100% of my morals is the day I'll leave'. For these women, even though they were all working, post-release employment was seen through a different lens. It was a stark reminder that, despite the deprivations they encountered, they found meaning in their lived experiences of imprisonment and actively sought to use these experiences to build a better future.

While most of the men and women I interviewed were in paid work, some found it difficult to secure employment. In the next section, I highlight their challenges and how they overcame them, considering the strategies they used to reduce the effects of their criminal label and associated stigma.

IV. The Challenges of Securing Employment with a Criminal Label

Most participants were aware that they could secure employment once they left prison. Yet, most wanted to secure a meaningful role that either involved returning to their businesses or a job related to their interests or future ambitions. Some hoped to transfer their lived experiences of crime and punishment into practical, real-world jobs where they believed they could make a difference. However, I found that, despite governmental initiatives to remove barriers to employment and create a fairer system for hiring people with a criminal record (Business in the Community, 2023; Ministry of Justice, 2023c), attempts to secure employment were hindered by disclosing their offence and the associated stigma of their criminal label. Consequently, this meant interviewees often had to find ways to manage the stigma of criminalisation with potential employers.

I return to Jessica's ambition to work with female ex-prisoners in a criminal justice setting. 'I tried desperately to find a job, but I didn't even get as far as the first interview', she told me. One job had a 'good salary', and the 'job description

had my name written all over it. I told them I am your service user and have lived experience'. 'I've got this knowledge, like professional experience', but the charity was not persuaded. Given that experiences were gained from a custodial sentence, Jessica believed this exposure to penal policies and practices was valuable to help reform the system. However, her application for a campaign advisor role in the Ministry of Justice had the same outcome. 'They took a while, but it was a no', she said dejectedly. Not unexpectedly, constant rejection was demotivating, and Jessica was 'sent right down the bottom again'. She attributed such decisions to her incarceration: 'I had to tell them I had a criminal record'.

After repeated unsuccessful job applications in the criminal justice sector, Jessica decided not to apply for any more jobs, turning to alternative routes to employment where her criminal label would be less of a hindrance: 'I'll try and create something for myself. I used to be quite known in the medical industry as a promoter and have been approached by a clinic that desperately wants me, but they can't figure out how they will pay me'. At the same time, her self-worth had to be financially compensated: 'I'm waiting to hear back from them. I could do it again easily, but I won't do it for free'.

Therefore, a criminal record can significantly hinder the process of securing employment, and concealing this information can prove difficult in the workplace. Particularly in public sector jobs, such as roles within the Ministry of Justice, criminal histories may be harder to evade as employer background checks and publicly accessible information make the effects of criminal labelling increasingly 'sticky' (Uggen and Blahnik, 2016). The employment disclosure process was detrimental, particularly for women.

Before imprisonment, Emily had worked for 22 years in the same company.

She was convicted of fraud and was given a custodial sentence of two and a half years. She explained that before her manager passed away, he had increased her wages above what was stated in her contract. 'They carried on paying my wages after he died, but I didn't realise the other directors had no idea about it', she told me. Emily was nonetheless sentenced, even though she claimed that all her wages were paid through PAYE (Pay as You Earn) and that she had paid national insurance.

Emily was living what she called 'an ordinary life' before being sent to prison. She said she was happily married with a daughter and a son. 'There's been a lot of normal people like me caught up in the judicial system', she stated. Emily explained that 'it doesn't matter what type of person you are. It will always be attached to you'. After serving 15 months, she was released from East Sutton Park. She found disclosing her sentence the most significant barrier to gaining employment: 'It's not just the sentence. I have to disclose for 10 years'. She had claimed that staff in East Sutton Park had stated that a sentence was fine to put on a curriculum vitae. However, Emily chose not to, fearing that disclosure could be used against her.

Despite having already secured a job inside prison, Emily wanted to 'put herself out there' by applying for other roles upon release. When she applied for alternative roles, she disclosed her offence verbally. She explained: 'I felt like maybe I was in a safe space and thought I would be honest and upfront. I was hoping they would acknowledge that'. I understood that Emily wanted to be transparent and demonstrate her honesty to potential employers and jobs she thought might be a possible path for the future. Like Grace's (2022) findings on how formerly incarcerated women managed the stigma of criminal records through

honesty and transparency, Emily attempted to demonstrate that she was ‘morally upright and trustworthy, hoping that such positive attributes would outweigh the negative stereotypes of criminalisation’ (ibid: 83). She described the consequences of being turned away from this job because of what she perceived to be her criminal label:

It’s put me off applying for other jobs because I automatically think I’m being judged, and people will protect their brands. I was devastated when I got that email. It took my confidence and hit me for six. I felt like the worst person in the world. It flattened me for a couple of weeks. (Emily)

Like Jessica, Emily found rejection from a compatible and attractive job demotivating. The constant rejection due to her crime deterred Jessica from applying for other jobs, whereas Emily had already secured a job in prison. While Emily had no luck securing alternative roles, she continued working as a part technician and client communications manager. She felt genuinely safe in her workplace and accepted for who she was rather than what she had done in the past: ‘They don’t ask you but know where you’ve come from’. Emily was enjoying her job and the opportunities it presented:

I oversee all client care emails and arrange replacement plants and installations. I taught myself spreadsheets because I’m doing a lot of computer admin [...] We met with a sustainable landscape architect and went around the garden. I went to prison and did a workshop with the girls. I’m really busy, but I don’t think, why do I have to go to work today? (Emily)

Employment increased confidence and self-esteem, which gave Emily a sense of fulfilment and achievement. She found it somewhat overwhelming that she was still in this role, particularly as she had believed she would return to her previous job after being released. ‘When I went back to work with my best friend, she

promised me a job, and then I realised she wanted me back for the wrong reasons because she had nobody else'. Emily believed she was worth more than what she had been through and walked away from the opportunity, even though, at the time, she thought it was part of her future.

She used her newfound confidence to remove herself from uncomfortable situations and developed her career in the business. Working was more than just a job for Emily. It was a way for her to reflect on her past experiences and help those in similar positions within the prison. I asked her how she felt going back to prison, especially as people often try to move away from prison life once they are released:

It's something that I thought I would never want to do. I introduced myself and said this time last year, I was sitting in your shoes. Some of them didn't believe it. I think it gave them hope that there was light at the end of the tunnel. I couldn't talk about it before. I couldn't identify where I was and who I was. I seemed to have overcome that.
(Emily)

Returning to prison to share her work experiences with the prisoners was received positively. I wanted to understand what made work such a special place, to which Emily replied: 'They saw me in my darkest times and have seen me now. They can relate to how I felt and supported me, reaching out to see if I was ok'. Disclosure of her offence was not a problem in this instance, and the fact that there was a belief in Emily helped her at a time when she was experiencing self-doubt due to being turned down for other jobs. Not being judged by past experiences and being able to bring her whole self to work, not modifying her personality and character to what she perceived the institution desired, made Emily feel comfortable and safe in the environment. Emily explained how she had spoken in front of 90 people, including representatives from one of the largest infrastructure firms. 'I want to prove to people that prison is just temporary, not reality. I'm just trying to break

the stigma and show people that things happen, and it's fine because you can come through the other side'.

While Emily had long-term commitments to the role and appreciated the nonjudgmental acceptance of the organisation, the feeling of being judged because of her prison sentence was not wholly eradicated: 'Sometimes when I'm with people I don't know at work, I'm like what are you thinking'? Emily found the perception of judgment difficult and felt that her criminal label was not completely diminished. This unease was furthermore apparent in other settings through family: 'When my husband introduced me to one of his co-workers, they said, 'I thought she would have a skinhead and tattoos'. Emily found it hard to meet people for the first time and sometimes 'withdrew' from the conversation as some encounters felt a bit diminishing without her entire background being recognised. In her words: 'I find it difficult talking about it. It makes me vulnerable. It's my safe space who I feel comfortable talking to'. Emily reduced the stereotypical perceptions of the 'offender' by avoiding situations in which her criminal label would be exposed. Despite attempts to manage the effects of her stigma, it did not diminish the feeling of anxiety and unease about her past being eventually discovered by people with whom she interacted.

Similar challenges concerning employment disclosure processes arose for men. Dylan, alongside Fiona, was the youngest participant at age 23. He described himself as a 'normal guy'. He dropped out of his second year of college to focus on his plumbing business, where he earned a good income. Eventually, he claimed that he was sued for £30,000 due to an unfinished job, which led to the flooding of a property. He blamed it on a plumber who he believed left a leak over the weekend. As a result, he closed his business. After a breakdown in his family structure and

relationship with his girlfriend, he became more isolated. These personal issues led Dylan to different jobs to 'keep afloat'. He accumulated significant debts and began borrowing money from others. Dylan was sentenced to seven years for armed robbery.

He was released from Spring Hill after serving half of his sentence. Dylan spoke of the implications of having to disclose his offence to employers:

You have to report to everyone you encounter that you're a criminal. I have to disclose it even if the employer doesn't ask or if it's not in the job description. I thought you only had to disclose it if you're asked about it or if there's a criminal background check. It cost me a few places where I could have lived and cost me a few jobs because they needed someone to work in the next few days. (Dylan)

Due to background checks and the disclosure process, Dylan continued to struggle to secure employment. Such matters had a broader effect, making it hard to obtain housing, for example. To mitigate the detrimental impact of the criminal label, he avoided applying for jobs that required him to disclose his offence or where background checks were mandatory. Eventually, Dylan opened a limited company for himself, working on a contractual basis. He was adamant about 'going his way', mainly to reduce the effects of his stigmatised past and overturn negative perceptions and stereotypes through self-employed work. For Dylan, like Jessica, securing employment became an individual endeavour.

V. The Relationship between Prison Work and Post-Release Outcomes

The testimonies of those I interviewed reveal several implications. Firstly, they clarified that prison jobs are precarious and temporary solutions with disproportionately low wages. Secondly, neoliberal ideologies underpin them. Open regimes emphasise that prisoners are accountable for their progression within

the prison system while, at the same time, these institutions profit from their labour. A few individuals, like Mohammed, refused to 'play the game' and opted out of the working regime to stay true to their interests and what they perceived valuable. They avoided becoming a 'product of the prison environment'. Thirdly, while most struggled to secure their employment while incarcerated, they had little choice but to accept what was on offer. Gaining an income and keeping busy were motivating factors in securing a job. Only a few people described their accounts of prison work as positive. These were people like Tony who did not have work experience or educational qualifications, so he took the opportunity to work inside the prison and prepare for his release. While the prison labelled Tony's job as 'waste management', in practice, this translated to working in the gardens, picking up rubbish and disposing of them. He recognised that this kind of work was far from ideal and demotivating, as it involved working five days a week for £10. Despite this, Tony knew he 'desperately needed a job' on release, so he acknowledged his circumstances and accepted this job to embed a routine for the outside world.

The relationship between prison and post-imprisonment employment was significant in several ways. While the Ministry of Justice (2022b) has invested in more meaningful work in prisons and equipping individuals to secure jobs post-imprisonment, their testimonies reveal limitations in how open prisons prepare them for release, making them poorly paid, precarious workers. Employment opportunities did not facilitate post-release outcomes in ways that applied to prisoners' previous work experiences or future aspirations. This is why most of the men and women I interviewed secured alternative employment as soon as they left prison, while others made working arrangements from inside the prison so they had a job in place for when they were released.

The men and women I interviewed carried their criminal labels into society. One of the biggest obstacles to securing employment was the impact of disclosing their offence, which was perceived as a hindrance to obtaining a job in the workplace. Like men, women recognised that the stigmatised characteristic of the criminal record was a disadvantage among potential employers. However, as Grace (2022: 83) highlights, ‘the ways in which they engage in the management of their stigma is malleable and fluid’, with some seeking to ‘avoid disclosure and keep their record a secret, even though choosing to conceal their record carried the risk of discovery and expulsion’. Others attempt to manage the stigma of criminalisation by being honest and transparent about their circumstances, as shown in Jessica and Emily’s accounts. This persona echoes Goffman’s (1963) observation that stigmatised individuals seek to convey desirable identities to others. Despite such idealist endeavours, Grace (2022: 83) cautions that ‘performances of honesty may be less successful for women than men, given the heightened ‘dual deviance’ stigma they face’, exposing both legal and gender norms.

Despite the financially precarious position individuals found themselves in, Tony, for example, told me that although he was making more money living the ‘street life’ before he was incarcerated, he wanted to turn his life around. Doing this meant working legitimately to save money and support his children. When I asked him about the most important things for his future, having a job and earning an income was a means to repair the relationships he lost while incarcerated:

I missed a lot. My two boys are not babies anymore. My first son is a young adult now. I was hardly there for my second kid. I missed all the birthdays. He doesn’t really know me because I went to prison. So, I need to build that relationship and be there for them. (Tony)

I asked Tony what ‘being there’ meant for his children. He explained that spending time was essential to rebuilding relationships and that having money would enable him to take his children out for meals and buy them birthday gifts. The novelty of work meant more than just gaining an income and being financially secure. Despite not being the most lucrative job, it would make the difference between Tony having the means to carry out family responsibilities and provide care and support for his children. Employment, therefore, carried a moral dimension regarding how the money could be utilised to make up for lost time.

A similar sentiment was shared with Tyson. One of his daughters was married, and the other had a child soon after he was released. His son was 17, studying car mechanics at college and working part-time. After serving eight years incarcerated, Tyson acknowledged wanting to live a different life for his children when he left prison. Before prison, he was set in his ways of ‘earning money and putting family on the back burner’. Imprisonment was a chapter to reflect on past experiences. Tyson wanted to continue working for another 20 years because he claimed to be ‘a good grafter’. I asked him what it was that motivated him to continue working into old age, to which he responded:

I’ve been done for 16 years and done 8 of them inside. It’s a long time for a kid to miss. I won’t let my son do anything like that. I smother him a little bit and keep him at home. He knows the score. He stays away from the old bill. Don’t ever follow in your dad’s footsteps. I want to make something so I can leave something for my kids.
(Tyson)

The value and meaning of earning an income changed for some interviewees after imprisonment, as it was seen as an extension of financial security. Tyson attributed his work to providing for his children and recognised that earning a wage was more than simply experiencing self-gain. It benefited his family, and during his

awakening inside prison, he realised that he wanted to work for the right reasons. It was evident that for Tyson and Tony, fatherhood impacted what type of individuals they aspired to be. Working precariously in various prison jobs prompted these men to consider how they envisioned supporting their children and becoming role models for them in the future. In their eyes, they had committed a crime and paid their debt to society. Learning from mistakes informed their actions, enabling them to overcome past deficits and provide their children with a positive life.

IV. Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I outlined the governmental changes implemented to grant prisoners more opportunities and access to meaningful work, and to increase job prospects once they are released into society. While most of the men and women I interviewed had jobs, many were ‘employees by default’ who participated in precarious labour activities because they were the only available options within the regime. Such accounts indicate that many people leave prison with unstable employment trajectories and independently turn to alternative employment once they are released. This suggests that it could take a longer time to establish a working career and integrate into the community. The participants’ work aspirations could arguably be conceptualised as modest and conventional pathways into mainstream society. However, what is perceived as modest in the general population may be unattainable for people leaving prison who are in a significantly disadvantaged social position (Galnander, 2020; see also Shapland and Bottoms, 2011).

The testimonies demonstrate that the working prison regime in its current

neoliberal form is failing. It disregards people's prior work experiences and subjects them to mundane work with poorly paid wages. I am not advocating an abolitionist position to remove the existence of open prisons. Nor am I arguing that prisons ought to provide the same level of employment that people experienced before imprisonment. Instead, I make a case for the potential of open prisons to facilitate employment opportunities and resettlement in the community. Therefore, I contend that there needs to be more meaningful employment which is aligned with an individual's future goals and interests. This would provide opportunities compatible with personal goals, support post-release integration, encourage positive resettlement outcomes, and facilitate desistance from crime.

Open conditions grant prisoners access to the Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) scheme, enabling them to work and earn an income to prepare for their transition into the community. The regime can help men and women acquire new skills and gain experience for post-release employment by creating external employment opportunities. The shortcomings of the regime, however, are primarily characterised by a lack of specific measures geared to support prisoners' release. The generalisation of work opportunities is insufficiently equipping individuals with the particular support they require to overcome post-release obstacles. Such limitations are further exacerbated by the impetus to individualise the prisoner regime, where men and women ultimately hold accountability to navigate setbacks and operate in the broader social, economic, and cultural contexts to which they will return.

Post-release challenges are intensified for people seeking employment with a criminal record. As illustrated, stigma and criminal labelling are apparent through employer disclosure forms and other individual background checks, which

profoundly impact employment prospects. Men and women leaving prison shoulder the weight of the ‘criminal label’ (Uggen and Blahnik, 2016), which exacerbates other post-release necessities, such as securing housing. Tyler’s (2020: 7) notion of ‘stigma-power’ outlines the political function of stigma as ‘governmental technology of division and dehumanisation...’ that corrodes ‘compassion, crushing hope, weakening social solidarity’. The operation of perceived stigma-power was apparent in women’s experiences of criminalisation as well as in their discussion of obtaining a job and working with people, more generally (Barr and Rutter, 2022). Such accounts highlight that stigma does not exist in isolation (see Condry, 2007), nor is it experienced only interpersonally. Instead, stigma ‘others’ criminalised individuals and further creates long-lasting barriers.

Obtaining full-time employment is, therefore, not as straightforward as it may appear. As Grace (2022: 85) has highlighted in her qualitative study, social, political, and legal systems ‘entrench poverty and marginalisation within the neoliberal labour system’. In the United Kingdom, this is mainly expressed through ‘criminal records, 0 hours contracts, the cost of living crisis and the idea of the working poor’ (Barr, 2023: 171). Thus, while individuals can navigate the criminal record by emphasising their agency and ability to take decisions into their own hands, there is a risk of downplaying the role of the stigma of the criminal label, which puts genuine structural constraints on men’s and women’s possibilities for post-release employment.

By contrast, the benefits of working existed insofar as individuals actively participated in securing them. Nina made the most of her employment and actively pursued her goals, saving as much money as possible to prepare her for life in the

city. Open conditions encourage prisoners to be independent actors capable of making their own decisions and being responsible for their progression within the regime. Being a good prisoner, staying out of trouble and complying with the regime are insufficient to expedite release. Individuals must demonstrate an active commitment to their rehabilitation through self-governance of behaviour (Crewe, 2011a; Shammas, 2014) and ‘visible compliance’ to the regime (Khan, 2020), while the open prison plays a passive role in supporting resettlement needs.

Eventually, nearly everyone in open conditions is released into society. However, their lack of preparation and transitional support meant that most people used alternative means to secure a ‘good job’ and reassert their societal positions. Despite the government’s aspirations to increase job prospects upon release (Ministry of Justice, 2022b), most participants achieved this goal independently. Returning to Mohammed’s testimony at the outset of this chapter reveals that he was, like the other participants, the only person who could make a positive change in his life. Tyson’s phrase, ‘You got to work your ticket,’ particularly applies to individuals like Mohammed, who have been incarcerated for most of their lives. Employment is then perhaps more vital for these individuals than for those imprisoned for the first time, who often have support structures in place to help them navigate the obstacles they encounter. While the people I interviewed experienced precarious labour, low wages, and a lack of transitional support, the limited help to obtain work exerted more strain on those with lower levels of social and financial support when they left prison. Helping vulnerable and marginalised men and women, often on the fringes of society, secure meaningful work seems a vision worth pursuing for everyone.

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how work opportunities and

resettlement preparation within prison influence post-release employment experiences and outcomes for men and women. Although transitioning into society and gaining employment were largely independent endeavours, many of the people I interviewed mentioned that they had to overcome further obstacles to help them resettle and integrate into the community. While the Prison Service provided work opportunities, the Probation Service supervised individuals once they were released. The interviewees did not mention the prison as a factor supporting their transition into society. Instead, they described the numerous hurdles they encountered while serving the remainder of their sentence in the community. In the next chapter, I demonstrate that while probation supervision and practices aim to support resettlement, they often hinder the post-release necessities of individuals seeking to integrate into society.

Chapter 5

The Resettlement Challenges Under Probation Supervision

It was difficult not to jump into old habits. Coming out, I had no money and no place to stay. I had no prospects because I couldn't get a job. Probation wasn't helping with the CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) card, which I did while I was inside. This is the card used for building sites⁴. I tried to return to the Open University to continue with accounting and economics. I was doing my UCAS (University and Colleges Admissions Service) applications in prison, but they didn't materialise. Eventually, I got accepted, but probation didn't approve it because I had to prove my EU settlement scheme and had a problem with my share code. Probation took too long to approve everything in time. I was supposed to get universal credit and a loan, but I couldn't apply. It's been a nightmare.

You learn to believe that probation is where you can go for everything when you come out. You think they can help you, so you let things evolve. Then you realise that they can't do anything for you. They're useless. They can get you your travel warrant so you can see them. They'll give you a phone number to refer you to agencies that try to say they'll call you, but never do. I've applied for government grants for businesses, money advice services, housing support and education. Out of all the things I did, only two phone calls happened. One was to arrange another phone call, and the other was to say sorry, we're busy. Can we call you back? They never did. I got sick of these services promising they'd be an appointment, but it never happened. I cancelled every single service because they weren't doing anything. I tried to use all the support options, but they weren't there.

They (probation) were supposed to get me a place to stay. I stayed with my mate for the first few days. Within the first two weeks, they were supposed to have a place for me through the council. None of that was done. The charity people who help with housing said they sent all the paperwork to the councils, but never received anything. So, I was sofa surfing at my friend's, sleeping on his sofa for about 6 to 7 weeks. Then I started looking for cheap rooms, but they went quickly, and the whole process of checks was too long. I was trying

⁴ The Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards 'provide proof that individuals working on construction sites have the appropriate training and qualifications for their job' (Construction Skills Certification Scheme, 2024: 1).

to do everything correctly, but kept hitting a brick wall. I spent another two months on a sofa. My back was hurting. Probation was as useful in that process as they were on the inside. They were sending me off to the same team that supposedly did something but did nothing. It was running back and forth in circles, with phone calls hanging up after an hour on the phone, waiting and no calls back. I just gave up.

(Dylan, Spring Hill)

Dylan spent most of his sentence in a medium-security local and resettlement prison for men. Like all the participants I interviewed, Dylan served the first half of his sentence inside prison and the remainder in the community under the supervision of the Probation Service. Dylan's testimony above captures numerous hurdles people encounter when transitioning from prison to society. Many people I spoke with described similar obstacles to their resettlement on release. Dylan complained of the restrictions his licence conditions imposed, the limited transitional support offered by the Probation Service, and difficulties securing housing. Unable to receive the support he required to integrate into the community, Dylan was blunt: 'I would say to anyone about to come out, don't expect any help. Help yourself'.

Studies exploring the impact of probation supervision on prisoner resettlement have produced essential findings to advance criminological knowledge (Canton, 2022; Fernando, 2021; King, 2013a; McNeill and Graham, 2019). Despite this growing body of scholarship, however, there remains limited research on the early post-release difficulties facing prisoners under probation supervision. In this chapter, I follow the same group of people in the community to understand their experiences of serving the second half of their sentence on licence. I explore their early days when they sought to reconstruct their lives under the supervision of the Probation Service. I illustrate that while probation supervision

and practices aim to support resettlement, they often hinder the post-release necessities of people attempting to integrate into society.

To build this argument, the empirical components are divided into three parts, each focusing on specific obstacles to prisoner resettlement. To set the context, I provide an outline of the Probation Service's functions and the relevant policy frameworks. Then I analyse men's and women's accounts of probation supervision. I illustrate how their licence conditions forced them to significantly adjust their lifestyle. Next, I highlight prisoners' perceptions of probation support and how it impacted their resettlement. In the final empirical section, I examine people's struggles to obtain housing and accommodation, and the impact on their ability to integrate into society. In the concluding discussion, I present the implications of the findings in light of the research on resettlement and desistance.

I. Probation Supervision in England and Wales

In England and Wales, the Probation Service supervises individuals serving their sentence in the community, ensuring safeguards are in place to protect the public. The aims of the Probation Service are outlined in governmental guidelines, which are highlighted in the following statement:

‘Our priority is to protect the public by the effective rehabilitation of offenders, by reducing the causes which contribute to offending and enabling offenders to turn their lives around’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024d: 1)

The Probation Service is responsible for sentence management, accredited programmes, unpaid work, and structured interventions. Rehabilitation and resettlement are integral to their work. Once people are released from prison, they are usually supervised in the area where they reside. Supervision meetings with

probation officers are typically held on a weekly or monthly basis. Their supervision focuses on ‘strengthening the probation practitioner’s relationship with people on probation, using the right key skills, activities, and behaviours to achieve the most effective outcomes and enable offenders to make positive changes to their lives’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024d: 1).

The men and women I interviewed were all serving a determinate prison sentence. They served the first half of the sentence in prison and the second half in the community on licence. People must comply with the licence conditions once they start the community portion of their sentence. These conditions are ‘the set of rules individuals must follow if they are released from prison but still have a part of their sentence to serve in the community’ (Parole Board, 2022: 1). This period in which people are still ‘on licence’ aims to ‘protect the public, to prevent reoffending, and to secure the successful reintegration of the individual back into the community’ (ibid). There are four types of licence conditions: ‘standard’, ‘compulsory’, ‘additional’ and ‘bespoke’. Most interviewees in this study were placed under standard and additional conditions.

Everyone released from a determinate sentence is placed on a standard licence. Some of these conditions include: ‘keeping in touch and receiving visits from the supervising officer by instructions given by the supervising officer’ or ‘residing permanently at an address approved by the supervising officer and obtaining the prior permission of the supervising officer for any stay of one or more nights at a different address’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a: 7). Additional licence conditions may be required when standard conditions are ‘deemed insufficient to assist the individual’s successful integration into the community, to prevent further reoffending or to ensure the protection of the public’

(HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a: 9). Some of these conditions include electronic monitoring tags, to monitor a person's movements, or 'exclusion zones', marking geographical boundaries that individuals must not enter.

A person may be sent back to prison if they break their licence. These conditions, however, must be 'preventative as opposed to punitive and proportionate, reasonable and necessary' (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a: 6). They are not intended as punishment. The general rule is that 'the restriction which the licence condition puts in place must be no greater than is necessary to manage the risk' (Parole Board, 2022: 1). I will illustrate how men and women experience these licence restrictions as unfair and unnecessary to their resettlement and integration into society.

Rehabilitative service providers, such as charities and other third-sector organisations, assist the Probation Service in delivering resettlement services. Their support includes employment, training and education, accommodation and housing advice, as well as personal well-being. The referral of people to external support services can be understood as part of a broader contextual shift to privatising the criminal justice system, where third-party agencies and associated bodies work in tandem to increase cost-savings, efficiency, and streamline services to provide quick, easy-access solutions to specific issues in the release process (Burrell, 2022; Tidmarsh, 2020). The participants I interviewed felt their struggles in the community were passed on to charities and councils, with minimal direct support from probation officers.

The Ministry of Justice (2021a) has awarded multi-million-pound contracts to organisations, mainly in the voluntary sector, to reduce reoffending and facilitate people's pathways out of crime. Part of this government funding, worth

approximately £200 million, aims to address the specific needs, issues, and underlying causes of women's crimes. Charities like St Mungo's, Shelter and NACRO 'support individuals with stable accommodation and work alongside the Probation Service's temporary accommodation service' (Ministry of Justice, 2021a: 1). This is a burgeoning area of social policy and is supported by the evidence that 'people in stable accommodation are 50% less likely to commit further crimes' (Ministry of Justice, 2023d: 1).

The government's vision is that 'no one subject to probation supervision is released from prison homeless' (Ministry of Justice, 2021b: 46). While statutory responsibility for housing and homelessness in England and Wales lies with local authorities, HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) provide short-term temporary accommodation placements in circumstances when additional public protection measures are required. While many prison leavers are temporarily housed in basic hostels, others are placed in approved premises. Approved premises are residential units that the Probation Service runs to support a safe transition from custody into the community. They also allow probation staff to monitor and support high-risk prisoners. Like prisons, approved premises are staffed 24 hours a day and impose various constraints on a person's freedom. Individuals usually stay in this accommodation for three months, but this can be extended depending on their circumstances and the availability of safe move-on arrangements. The government has invested £23 million in building 200 new spaces in approved premises to ensure people have secure accommodation following their release (Ministry of Justice, 2021c). Having an address allows prison leavers to 'find work and access treatment for addictions and mental health problems, which are also proven to help reduce the risk of reoffending' (ibid: 1).

The role of community provision in facilitating resettlement has been well documented in the criminological literature. A growing body of work has explored the effects of probation supervision on resettlement outcomes and rehabilitative aspirations in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Durnescu, 2011; Fernando, 2021; King, 2013a). In the British context, the dominant framework in delivering prisoner assessment and treatment has been the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model due to its effects on reducing reoffending. Despite the appeal of RNRs to criminal justice practitioners and policymakers, a critique of this model has shown that an individual's assessment is underpinned by broad licence conditions, systemic rules and procedures, and risk management, as opposed to advocating constructive and engaging processes of social and psychological change (Canton, 2022; Tidmarsh, 2020; Ward and Maruna, 2007). As I will illustrate, there is often a discrepancy between people's needs and how penal institutions support them. Halsey's (2016) longitudinal study of resettlement among young male prisoners in South Australia offers a relevant example. His research participants' aspirations to abstain from criminal activity were destabilised by the interventions and resources employed by social control agencies to manage and regulate the risk of reoffending effectively. Like Halsey's parolees, the people I spoke to were placed under constant surveillance and monitoring.

Alternative models have been shown to facilitate more prospective-driven supervision, focusing on individual strengths rather than past deficits (Dealey, 2018; King, 2014; Maruna et al., 2004). The good lives model (GLM) shows how probation practices can promote tangible goals perceived as valuable and necessary to a person's life (Burnett and Maruna, 2006; Maruna and LeBel, 2002; McNeill, 2016; Ward, 2002). The development of strength-based approaches to probation

has contributed to the relatively underexplored concerns associated with the early transitions from prison to the community (Healy, 2010; King, 2013b).

More recently, studies have sought to explore the impact of supervision on resettlement processes in an international setting. In Fernando's (2021) comparative analysis of 40 English and French men, the English participants described their experiences of probation supervision as passive and lacking resources to address individual concerns. Durnescu's (2011: 539) characterisation of probation restrictions highlights the individual deprivations and unavoidable effects experienced under probation supervision: 'deprivation of autonomy', 'pain of reorganising the daily routine', 'deprivation of time' and 'pain of revisiting the offence'. These 'pains of probation' (ibid) shed light on the wide-ranging burdens and obstacles facing individuals on release.

Other studies have drawn attention to the effectiveness of probation supervision and practices. A common finding suggests that positive change and improvement in resettlement processes stem from a person's desire and motivation to initiate change rather than from interventions and support received directly from probation (Farrall, 2002; McCulloch, 2005). King's (2013a: 147) research found that probation impacted the 'early development of new, pro-social identities'. However, it tended to have a less positive effect in supporting people with specific social and personal issues. These findings suggest that while probation serves to facilitate resettlement, its practices and supervision place individuals in positions that have implications for their lives. Building on this body of work, I show that, despite the rehabilitative intentions of the Probation Service, their practices often hinder rather than support men's and women's early transitions from prison to the community.

II. The Impact of Licence Conditions on Resettlement

While probation supervision is meant to support resettlement and pathways out of crime, the people I interviewed usually perceived them as barriers to their attempts to integrate into society. Mohammed, who had been in and out of prison for most of his life and who was released from Spring Hill with an electronic tag, explains:

I'm trying to get back to a bit of normality and trying to get back some of what I've forgotten and make plans for the future. You think to yourself, hold on, I've still got these restrictions [...] You're trying to have a clean slate and start a new chapter but dealing with all these obstacles they throw at you. I'm scared every single day. What if somebody calls you in? It's a split-second decision. It could be a misjudgment or accidentally being late to a probation meeting [...] I'm thinking about how I will eventually get out of it all.
(Mohammed)

Building a fresh start and restoring aspects of life before imprisonment was difficult under conditions of daily monitoring. 'Location tags' check if the person is going to areas not permitted by the court or prison, that the person is attending their appointments or programmes as part of licence conditions, and that they are complying with their curfews. This type of tag made planning for the future difficult and was perceived as invasive to the freedom that people thought they would enjoy upon release. Many were afraid of breaching licence conditions and being recalled to prison: 'I still have that fear driving through the same streets every day with police everywhere. It's been a repeat cycle, but now I want to break it'. Mohammed was trying to move away from his previous life of crime. However, the way he was used to living was superseded by the debilitating tendencies of the probation system. Participating in routine activities, such as going to work, was under close watch through surveillance mechanisms like electronic monitoring.

The fear of breaching licence conditions left Mohammed 'living on the edge'.

The location tag must be charged for at least an hour daily. If it runs out of battery, this constitutes a potential breach, and the person could be sent back to prison. These requirements caused practical issues: 'I have to charge this every 7-8 hours. It's portable, but I have to plug it into a socket when it runs out. So, every 4-5 hours, I have to find a Costa and sit there for an hour charging it', Mohammed told me. I asked him how this requirement impacted his daily routine, and he replied: 'In my job, I'm with a gas man going from residence to residence. I can't tell him I have to stop for an hour. It's money we're losing'. The restriction of a tag made it difficult to work and complete other routine activities as usual, as alternative locations had to be identified to charge the tag while trying to complete assigned tasks and being mindful of not breaking the curfew.

Charlie, who was released into the community on an alcohol tag, offered another example of the restrictions people face. This type of electronic tag measures the level of alcohol in your sweat every 30 minutes and is used by probation to check whether a person is drinking alcohol. Charlie said, 'I'm not allowed to drink at all, not even on Christmas day with my family....because I used to own a pub, they thought I must be alcohol dependent'. Charlie claimed that he had a clean prison record and was assessed as not requiring any help with alcohol while serving ten years inside prison. He said he had been told that no additional licence conditions were needed for his release. As a 62-year-old man incarcerated for the first time, with a house, car, a secure job, and strong family ties, he was adamant about not committing another crime or starting to drink on release. As he said, 'I've got too much to lose'.

Nonetheless, Charlie's licence stated that he had to wear the alcohol tag for

six months. He noted that his probation officer said that if he abstained from alcohol and complied with his conditions, they would remove the tag after three months: ‘My probation officer said I’ve spoken to my supervisor, and we’re very happy with you. You’re getting on with your life and causing no problems. It’s been over a month since they said that, and I’m still wearing it’. I asked Charlie why he still had to wear the tag, to which he responded: ‘They said they’re having trouble contacting the company. If I were recalled, they would unclip it in an hour. You’re telling me a month later you can’t contact them to take it off, even though you promised’? While he complied with these restrictions, Charlie did not understand why these conditions were enforced:

In my assessments, I said I don’t drink alcohol, so they know. I didn’t commit an offence with a drink. I haven’t had a drink in 10 years. I did an alcohol awareness course in Spring Hill. I’ve done 32 courses when I was only supposed to do one. But probation has put me at high risk, and I’ve got to do the courses again so they can see for themselves and lower my risk. I’ve come out of prison with an exemplary record: no trouble, low risk to everybody, got on with everybody, worked, studied, and helped people in prison. So, everything I’ve done in 10 years means nothing. (Charlie)

Efforts to rehabilitate and participate in purposeful activity inside the prison were often disregarded on release. Charlie had been incarcerated for attempted murder and had received a 19-year sentence. The policy guidance emphasises that any additional licence conditions must be necessary and proportionate: ‘Any licence condition requested must have been identified as a way to manage a specific risk or issue posed by the individual, without limitation to the current index offence’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a: 9). The guidance further outlines that following the introduction of electronic alcohol tags, monitoring and abstinence conditions ‘may help to enforce elements of an alcohol-related programme’ (ibid:

14). Alcohol did not contribute to Charlie's offence, and he had participated in various rehabilitation programmes while incarcerated. Despite having completed several courses in addition to his sentence plan, he was still subject to additional licence conditions, which included a range of criteria that he had to comply with or risk the consequences of breaching his licence. While for Charlie and Mohammed, restrictions exerted unnecessary barriers to societal inclusion, they adhered to their conditions, despite viewing them as unfair, to avoid further prison time and disappointing their loved ones.

While many of those I interviewed assured me they complied with their licence conditions, some found routes around them. Jason, a 44-year-old man, was serving a 14-year sentence for a drug offence. He had spent around a quarter of his life serving a sentence and was adamant to 'get out and do things right this time'. Jason had worked in a family-run taxi business before imprisonment, which his brother had maintained while he was incarcerated. When he was released, Jason returned to work in this taxi company, participating in various back-office functions, such as banking and submitting HMRC (HM Revenue and Customs) returns. He quickly realised that he was unable to continue operating the business in the same way because of his licence restrictions: 'If I want to buy a car for £30K, I would have to buy it in the business and say it's a company car because of my crime'. While restrictions prevented Jason from living an ordinary life, it was a turning point for him as he realised that 'you can't merge both a criminal and law-abiding lifestyle'.

On the one hand, restrictions compelled people to adjust their daily routines to comply with licence conditions. On the other hand, living in a restricted way and not being able to access and participate in activities as experienced before

imprisonment prompted Jason to identify alternative ways around his licence:

I can't have anything in my name, so I duck and dive a little. Nothing I do is illegal. I've put myself on a low enough income so they can't take anything. My house is in my mum's name. It will be transferred to my brother. Then, I'll transfer it into the business. That cash will stay in the business, and I will live in that property. I will pay rent to the company. The company will pay the mortgage. They can't do anything because the house belongs to the business [...] If you stay somewhere overnight, you should inform probation. But if your parent's address is abroad, you can say your residential address is over there. (Jason)

Instead of encouraging social inclusion and desistance from crime, probation supervision felt for some like 'being back in jail'. Jason worked around his licence's 'grey areas' to 'live a normal life' while safeguarding his position to avoid breaching his conditions. For the people I interviewed, living a normal life was characterised by the routine aspects of everyday life we actively pursue or participate in (e.g., housing, employment, and so forth). While there was a general understanding that being on licence meant serving a sentence in the community, the people I spoke with had expected more freedom upon release from prison. The testimonies highlight how the nexus between penal power and the state transfers from prison to the community, illustrating that post-release experiences are intimately connected to the burdens and pains of imprisonment, which subsequently compound social disadvantage. In many ways, participants experienced living with their licence conditions as being in contention with their resettlement endeavours, even though they had been released.

III. Perceptions of Probation Support and Practice

Many people felt hopeful and excited upon their release from prison. They believed

the Probation Service could support and facilitate their transition into the community. Instead, many found their first days to be difficult. I return to Dylan's excerpt at the beginning of the chapter. He told me he had left Spring Hill with 'no prospects'. With 'no money' and a lack of help from probation, charities, and government services, Dylan struggled to integrate into the community. Despite his hurdles, he was optimistic: 'I muted the pessimism and turned up the volume on the optimism'. When I asked him what motivated him to remain hopeful, he told me that even though there was an element of doubt that probation could not help him, he was willing to try and seek support because there was hope: 'I was hoping that it's going to work because if it does it will be lovely, you know'? Like many people leaving prison, Dylan was trying to rebuild the foundations of his life, but despite efforts to do this, he felt probation was making it harder to realise some of the plans he had made for his release:

Getting a CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) card was supposed to take five working days. Probation lost the certificates, so I couldn't get the card I needed to work. I tried to return to university, but probation couldn't approve things in time. They give you a phone number and refer you to agencies that don't call you back. You are made to believe you will get help, but none of these services do. I even cancelled support from the council because they weren't helping me with universal credit. I believed I would get help, but eventually realised nobody would help me. You have to help yourself. (Dylan)

There was a discrepancy between what Dylan anticipated his release would look like and the realities of what he experienced. On the one hand, he told me that he had 'accepted his mistakes' and acknowledged that he had 'time to serve in the community'. On the other hand, he felt that being released from open conditions should have provided more opportunities to receive support from probation, which would have better integrated him into society. He had made numerous attempts to

seek help from a wide range of probation and associated post-release support services. In addition to seeking direct help from probation, other support services included a money advice service and housing support through the council, charities, and government agencies. Despite trying to utilise all the available support options, Dylan reached a point where he realised that he had to 'live for himself' and, therefore, act on his own accord. 'Don't expect any help. Help yourself', he stated. From my conversations with Dylan, I gathered that probation support was expected to be like the support received inside prison: 'You learn to believe that when you come out, probation is who you will ask for everything. You think this person can help me because they're the thing you most relate to as a prison officer'. There was an expectation that probation would be able to offer the same kind of help to address the struggles that arise upon release.

However, as Dylan's case illustrated, post-release support services failed to address basic individual needs and expectations, pointing to the stark reality that many people will face when leaving prison. The inadequate support from multiple organisations had more of a detrimental impact, leaving people like Dylan in states of neglect, hopelessness, and isolation. While Dylan went on to secure work and accommodation, he did this independently from probation and other community service providers.

Although some people I interviewed appeared to be building a successful life, few respondents found their supervision conducive to their transition and resettlement into society. Instead, they said, it felt like probation staff were only concerned with managing their risk levels. Elias, a 35-year-old man, was serving a seven-and-a-half-year sentence. Like Dylan, he too left Spring Hill without financial support or a home. When I asked what supervision discussions were like

with his probation officer, he replied:

Probation is not about rehabilitation and managing your transition into the community. Probation is just about risk assessment. That's it. What risk am I going to be? The algorithm that they use to deliver point scoring has taken away all the human relations aspects of the job [...] The computer makes up what category and what kind of person you are. (Elias)

Supervision discussions, Elias said, felt like a 'tick box exercise'. The risk-based approach to probation supervision is at odds with the development of social relationships and personal growth, which aim to restore individuals as contributing members of society. The Probation Service's organisational parameters prioritised corporate objectives over individual needs. Probation supervision was not specifically geared to support their individual goals but instead focused on applying standardised risk assessments:

I had to do a risk assessment. The officer said to me so tell me about how this all started. I said to her stop a minute. You're asking me to bring something up from seven years ago that I put to bed a long time ago. It's irrelevant [...] Another risk assessment they asked me about my two oldest children, aged 19 and 21. The officer asked what your children's names were, so I gave him the youngest child's name. He said he needs the two oldest children's names to forward it to social services. I said they've got nothing to do with social services because they're 19 and 21. Social services have never contacted me, so it's another ridiculous thing they ask of you. (Jason)

Probation practices were frequently employed to reduce reoffending and manage risk. While such matters are central aims of the Probation Service, individuals complained that probation officers were more concerned with historical events. Staff pushed them to associate with past negative experiences, an approach that revisited their crimes. Risk management supplanted rehabilitative efforts, negating future projections and individual aspirations in these accounts. Initial probation

conversations were predominantly retrospective and focused on social problems, rather than encouraging participants to engage in meaningful activities that would facilitate their resettlement. People wanted to move away from crime. However, they were routinely asked to talk about it. Such conversations were perceived as having only negative connotations as individuals sought to re-establish their societal positions. Strength-based interventions are instead centred on encouraging prisoners to abstain from their criminal pasts and plan for a positive future (Maruna et al., 2004; McNeill, 2016).

Jason's words above highlight how social control institutions can extend the boundaries of punishment. A sense of 'omniopicism' (Munn, 2011: 238) left Jason scrutinised by multiple agencies simultaneously. This 'transcerceral control' (Segrave and Carlton, 2013) felt invasive, and he believed it made it harder for him to resettle into the community.

Many women also described their experiences with their probation officers as highly burdensome. Instead of supporting their transition into society, they felt that their interactions made their lives unnecessarily difficult on release. When Sarah was in East Sutton Park, she had made two close friends with a pair of sisters, one of whom was released on the same day as her: 'We were best friends. We didn't integrate with anyone else', she said. When Sarah visited this woman one week after she was released, she had to explain that probation had contacted her to say she was not allowed to make contact or see her anymore. They had both been put on each other's licence, which restricted their contact. When Sarah asked for an explanation, her supervisor was initially reluctant to state a reason:

What she was saying is that because of my injuries, I'm classed as a vulnerable person, and she wants me to have proactive friendships in the community. Who are you to say it's not a proactive relationship?

My probation officer put a total stop to it. So, I'm allowed to speak to people who have killed people but not somebody whom I have a genuine friendship with? You're supposed to be helping with rehabilitation, but you're breaking somebody down. (Sarah)

Sarah's friend had lost her mother and children while incarcerated. 'She's been going through all of this and finally finds a genuine friend', Sarah said. 'She's quite dyslexic and autistic, so I was helping her write letters and figure things out with probation and the courts. Still, you're saying that's not a proactive friendship'. While Jason had perceived his risk assessments as invasive, he had accepted that probation officers were required to fulfil their duties. In Sarah's case, however, officers appeared to wield considerable discretionary power, weaving unwritten rules into her licence conditions: 'Probation has so much power, and you don't have an equal opportunity to defend yourself. You have to do what they tell you whether it makes sense or not'.

Sarah felt these additional restrictions were unjustified and had hindered her resettlement. The licence conditions policy framework seemed to partly reinforce Sarah's account, as non-contact with other prisoners on licence is not explicitly documented in the guidelines (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a). Most often, non-contact conditions concern victims, their families, and co-defendants. However, the policy guidelines state that:

'Permission does not need to be sought from people named on a non-contact condition, nor can a person refuse to be included in a non-contact condition where it is necessary and proportionate to manage the risks and issues posed by the offender on licence' (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a: 12).

The licence guidelines indicate that staff have discretion on what they perceive as 'necessary and proportionate to manage the risks and issues' (ibid) they believe to

be associated with the person serving a sentence in the community. Yet, prisoners must remain obedient and comply with the conditions, even if decisions regarding who can be named on their conditions are viewed as unfair. As the passage above indicates, prisoners and those implicated are also limited in their capacity to ignore or contest their licence conditions. Whereas Charlie conformed to restrictions that probation deemed relevant to his offence, Sarah, like Jason, felt they were unjustified and attempted to work around them:

There are so many loopholes and grey areas. They (probation) can do what they want. It says on my licence that I have no contact with my two friends without prior permission from probation, but it doesn't say I can't contact their dad and ask her how she is. So, I ring her dad, and if she's in the background, she's in the background. (Sarah)

Due to probation's limited support, Sarah found alternative ways to communicate with her friend, albeit indirectly. Like Jason, she worked around the 'grey areas' to 'live a normal life', which became necessary to get through the remainder of the sentence. The probation officers' decisions felt misguided as 'there was nobody there to police anything' and they were 'left to their own devices'. While guidelines were in place, men and women felt that they were being used against them rather than being supported in their transition back into the community and in integrating with their families and friends. Sarah stated that the guidelines were broad, but 'they leave themselves open'.

Interviewees described supervision as counterproductive and unhelpful. While some women sought to support themselves independently by getting a job, others were more reliant on help due to their circumstances. 'Probation hasn't asked me if I want a job or what I want to do', Sarah said. Probation made it harder for some women to reassert their positions in society. Echoing Elias' description of

probation supervision as a 'tick box exercise', Sarah stated that 'they live by the numbers. That's on your score. It's all a form. You can't do this. What can I do'? Sarah perceived that there were no alternatives. When I asked her what probation could have done that would have helped, she replied:

If I were a probation officer, I would look at what I could do to help this person, not make them depressed and miserable and put hurdles in front of them. When you were in prison, what were you dreaming about? What would you like to do? Where do you see yourself in 6 months? Never was I asked about anything that would positively impact my life. (Sarah)

Sarah felt that conversations with probation officers were seen as removed from supporting resettlement aspirations and individual goals. Many staff were perceived as indoctrinated into the system rather than helping people overcome their struggles on release: 'Even the nice people I've come across still don't have that mentality of what they can do to help'. A common thread among men's and women's conversations with probation was that they were driven by what was 'computer-generated' and less focused on what was necessary to their lives and factors that could make a difference. Another commonality was that probation requirements were seen as inconvenient and burdensome:

I had to see probation once a week for 5 months. I went in: Hi, how are you? I'm good, thanks. How are you? Gone, see you later. It's a driving offence. They know I don't drive. I don't have any courses to do. What is the necessity of that? The probation office where I lived had closed down, so I had to travel to another area and rely on my mum, dad, or somebody to take me. All of that to have the same conversation. I went to monthly appointments almost 8 months later. (Sarah)

Many people perceived conversations with their probation officer as a monitoring exercise rather than as an opportunity to offer support and help them with their

early transitions into society. Travelling to the probation office was a significant burden on participants. As demonstrated in Sarah's case, travel strained family members. Yet, when Sarah questioned the necessity of weekly appointments and relocation, she felt that every decision probation made was eroding her trust in the supervisor-probationer relationship: 'Before I felt like we had a rapport. I felt like I trusted her, but now that's all gone. Then that's when the threats start coming in. Oh, so you're not willing to work with me? Then maybe we need to rethink your position in the community'. Sarah perceived this statement as a threat of recall to prison, which she wanted to avoid. Therefore, she complied with the new arrangements. While participants were critical of the processes and practices of probation supervision, it served as a reminder that such requirements, in many ways, formed part of the punishment, as they remained a part of serving a sentence in the community.

Travelling to probation appointments was particularly burdensome for people who were working full-time. Jason presented similar views when I asked him about his experiences of being on probation. While Sarah was a first-time offender who was serving a shorter sentence, Jason had spent a significant portion of his life in prison. He had prior experience serving a sentence in the community under probation supervision. He made more significant efforts to contest decisions that impacted his life. Jason was in full-time employment, working 5 days a week. His probation office was 30 miles from his work, and he was required to attend a fortnightly appointment at 4 pm. When I asked him whether there were closer offices, he replied: 'On my journey from work, I pass 2 or 3 probation offices. Probation is supposed to be accessible'. It seemed that the location of his probation office was contrary to the government's aim to create a probation estate that is

‘accessible for all....supervised individuals’ (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2021: 157).

Jason explained that, after 7 months post-release, he was getting transferred to a site closer to where he worked and resided. However, he claimed that probation made it difficult for him as they wanted him to attend an appointment. He arrived early but was met with some challenges: ‘Duty officer said I can come down earlier. I went in, and the lady said I needed to be here at 4. I said I’d done this before, and it hasn’t been an issue until now’. Jason said he received a phone call after saying he was no longer allowed to the probation office closer to his work.

I asked Jason to provide more details, to which he said that ‘probation made a complaint’ about his unacceptable behaviour. When Jason asked why his behaviour was unacceptable, he further explained:

Apparently, I was rude. I said, define rude to me. I told her something she didn’t want to hear, and she didn’t like it, so she got upset. I wasn’t rude. I didn’t swear. I didn’t raise my voice. These are things that should have been investigated. I was on licence for four and a half years before this sentence, and I asked her if there were any complaints about my behaviour. No. So why would that happen now? Then her cogs started to turn. (Jason)

Jason did not feel he should have endured this encounter: ‘Probation is really bad. The system wants to punish you at every turn, and if they can, they will’. Taking matters into his own hands, Jason used his contacts at work to support the circumstances he found himself in with his probation officer: ‘I got my boss from work to email them. We’ve got other people here in the same position, but from our understanding, you guys are supposed to be helping them, not hindering them’. Similar to Sarah’s experience of probation’s unwritten and arbitrary rules, Jason also felt that there was no evidence or reasonable grounds to suggest he was

disobedient and therefore felt probation was acting unnecessarily punitive by making up their own rules: 'I said there needs to be somewhere where it says what unacceptable and acceptable behaviour is. She says no. It's up to the person on the day'.

Instead of making Jason's life more accessible, and despite the apparent power imbalance, Jason felt he had to act according to what he believed to be more conducive to supporting his resettlement. He used his prior experience of being on licence to question decisions perceived as unjust and 'tested the grey areas' but ensuring he stayed within the boundaries of his conditions: 'You guys are making it difficult for me, so I am going to move into my mum's address which puts me in the catchment area so you've got no choice but to give me a probation officer in my area'. Jason protected his position and emailed the probation officer, carefully documenting all the conversation details and providing her with all the necessary information. He was called back into the office a few weeks later. The probation officer told him that he had breached his licence because he had moved into an address without security checks: 'I informed you 2 weeks ago by email, and nobody has said I'm not allowed to do that, and it's a breach. What you're doing isn't right'. Probation did not follow up with the breach, and Jason was confident they would not, as he documented the exchanges. Nonetheless, during this time, Jason explained that it was affecting his children's lives because he wasn't there as much, and they had just got used to him being back from prison. 'It did stress me out at the time', he said.

Jason felt that placing licence conditions at the forefront of supervision was an obstacle. He did not have any issues with the licence itself or with having to serve the remainder of his sentence under specific conditions. Instead, they were

experienced as unjust, and this perceived unfairness prompted individuals to navigate around them. Despite this, many still abided by their licence to avoid being recalled to prison. Over time, however, Jason felt that his interactions with the Probation Service and the lack of support affected his well-being: 'I'm asking for your help and saying to you this is specifically affecting my mental health. You never asked me how I feel or whether I need help'. There were resonances with Sarah's experience, where interactions with probation officers felt overwhelmingly negative and dismissed individual welfare.

While participants expected the Probation Service to support their transition into society, it was unreasonable in some cases to expect that it would be able to remove all their barriers to resettlement. The enduring 'collusion between punishment and social welfare actors' (Miller, 2014: 307), such as employment programmes, housing provision, and healthcare, produce idealised neoliberal individual subjects responsible for managing their demands and precarity. Thus, while men and women are eligible for support from probation services, they are often referred to alternative community providers that seek to address their needs. While individuals are eligible for such care, it is frequently perceived as a stigmatising and punitive experience that exacerbates the burdens of post-imprisonment integration (see Phelps and Ruhland, 2021). These struggles of supervision for many will hinder, rather than promote, desistance processes.

I found shared experiences between men's and women's perceptions of their probation supervision. Like Sarah, Jason was not expected to participate in any courses but felt that travelling long distances to the office for the same 10-minute conversation was unreasonable, particularly as they could be held over the phone. Matters were further strained as Jason did not have a fixed probation officer,

so he often had to repeat his circumstances with duty officers: ‘There’s no one dealing with my case. I haven’t got into those deeper conversations because it’s a different person I’m seeing every time, so what’s the point of just repeating myself’. Questions felt arbitrary: ‘How’s it going? Family OK’? Despite this group of people struggling with challenges post-release, they felt their problems were sidelined. As a result, many of the conversations with their probation officers felt ‘pointless’ to use Jason’s phrase.

The most significant hurdle for the people I interviewed was locating and securing housing. Housing provision presents one of the most considerable hardships in the post-release context. The absence of affordable housing, coupled with the fact that many people leaving prison face deep poverty issues that deny them and their families the ability to meet basic needs, compounds social integration and resettlement. As a result of their lack of financial stability and resources, people exiting prison reside in a state of liminality: they do not have a home and alternate between shelters and streets (Hattery and Smith, 2010).

Despite recent governmental aspirations to support housing requirements for newly released prisoners (Ministry of Justice, 2020b), the people I interviewed suggest that these interventions failed to help them turn their lives around. The limited support in meeting housing needs places men and women in increasingly vulnerable positions, including states of homelessness, which exacerbate pre-existing disadvantage and social exclusion. The shortcomings of the facilitation of housing provision have significant implications for prisoners, most of whom need support to integrate into society.

IV. Housing Provision: Living on the Fringes

Seven of the 18 participants I interviewed after their release from prison did not have a home to which they could return. Sarah spoke for many in this group when she described her attempts to secure accommodation:

I had to do my housing application through the council as a homeless applicant. I had to do everything through external agencies because there wasn't anyone available to help me. Nobody was doing what they were supposed to be doing. I was putting apps in. You don't have internet access. I was released in 3 days, and you still haven't done anything about it. Luckily, I have a supportive family outside who helped me. (Sarah)

While incarcerated at East Sutton Park, Sarah was assured by the prison that an outside charity would help her secure housing. A few days before release, she had a video call with them to see what support they could offer. However, she claimed she had insufficient time to plan housing arrangements. The process of obtaining housing was rushed, particularly near the release date, causing stress and anxiety: 'I'm waiting to see if I've been approved for housing 12 hours before I'm released. Nobody cares', she said dejectedly.

When I asked her where she had planned to stay after release, she said, 'I was supposed to go back and stay with my family, and they were devastated that I wouldn't be able to go home'. She had visited them regularly on Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) and claimed she was never informed about an exclusion zone until her release. This restriction meant Sarah could not visit home or the surrounding area. This caused further strain, preventing Sarah from seeing her family. 'I can see them, but I have to leave that area, which is difficult. I couldn't do anything. I was excluded from everything as soon as I came out', she said. Consequently, she was housed in temporary accommodation on a year-long contract. Housing was secured through an external agency: 'There was a lady who

worked for a charity that helps people on the outside. I wouldn't have anything if she weren't there, so the Prison Service did nothing to ensure I had anywhere to go'.

Shortly after being released, Sarah was informed that an error had been made in her file and that she could have been allowed to return home. However, as she was now on a one-year contract, Sarah had to remain in temporary accommodation until the end of the contract period. 'After all that stress of being housed, I could have gone home without stress. It was a total miscommunication, but they don't give a shit'.

Although Sarah criticised the lack of support and associated burdens from prison and the Probation Service, she recognised and appreciated the charity's help. Sarah offered one of the few examples where post-release support services helped facilitate resettlement through housing. The charity provided other forms of practical support, including assistance with purchasing a laptop. In this case, external support was perceived as a 'lifeline' rather than an 'add-on' punishment. It would be easy to dismiss some of these accounts as internalised responsabilisation or simply misattributing gains that the person might have gained independently of supervision.

While Sarah's account illustrates the connection between housing arrangements, family ties and the hurdles of resettling into the community and accessing social support, most of the people I spoke with did not have family support structures in place to help them with housing:

Within the first week or two, I was supposed to have a place to stay through the council. None of that was done. The charity people said they sent all the paperwork to the councils, but never received anything. I was sofa surfing at my friend's, sleeping on his sofa for about six to seven weeks. Then I started looking for rooms, but the

cheap ones went quickly. I'd have to send the address to probation. Probation would check it and send it to the manager, taking 2 to 3 weeks to return because they send it to the police. Police do their checks, so the process is too long. (Dylan)

Like Sarah, while in prison, Dylan was referred to external organisations to secure accommodation. However, he was less fortunate than Sarah and failed to acquire accommodation on release: 'It was very difficult coming out because I had no money and no place to stay', he told me. After weeks of trying to secure housing through charities and councils, he chose to stay with his friend. Due to the difficulties of locating suitable housing, Dylan had few options but to obtain temporary accommodation through his friend. His experience not only illustrates how housing provision for people leaving prison is fragmented but also characterises the burdens associated with multiple agencies working under the purview of the criminal justice system that do not always provide sustained support in the community.

When I asked Dylan about his plans to get housing, he stated that, despite many attempts to sort out accommodation and turning to a range of housing support networks, he continued to 'hit brick walls' and 'ran back and forth in circles'. He tried to secure housing himself. Yet, he was not progressing any closer to obtaining accommodation: 'I was trying to do everything correctly, and it just wasn't working'. As a result, he decided to stay on a sofa at his friend's place for several months.

While Sarah and Dylan had their family and friends accommodate them, others had minimal social networks when they left prison, leaving them in a state of homelessness:

When I left prison, I was homeless. Spring Hill gave me a piece of

paper with 8 or 9 numbers, like crisis centres, hostels, and homeless shelters. You got a place for me to stay? No. We don't have space. No beds. Nothing. I didn't bother ringing anymore. I thought I'd make my accommodation. I'm telling probation I'm sleeping under bridges. I live on the street, and probation says you aren't doing that. Probation knows I'm homeless because I've told them. I'm still homeless [...] I still haven't got a doctor because I haven't got a place. They don't care. (Tyson)

People leaving prison with limited support structures felt they needed more help with housing. Such needs are part of broader national social housing policy concerns due to the United Kingdom's shortage of affordable homes (House of Commons, 2023). The critical element of post-release housing is 'the need for stability, security and belonging' (Johns, 2018: 206). Yet, social norms and public perception suggest that prisons will reform 'offenders' and provide them with the foundations necessary to operate effectively upon release. This narrow view fails to consider the collateral consequences of imprisonment and the numerous obstacles prisoners encounter on release. As illustrated in Tyson's case, housing issues leave many people in highly vulnerable positions immediately after they leave prison, exerting considerable strain on their resettlement and ability to integrate into the community. The constant lack of success in obtaining housing left people like Tyson with no alternative but to take shelter on the streets.

Not having a permanent address created further obstacles to accessing vital public services, such as healthcare. It also meant that Tyson was at risk of breaching his licence: 'Your licence conditions say if you're homeless, you're breaking conditions, which means you can go back to jail'. The official guidance on standard licence conditions seemed to support this statement: 'All those released from determinate sentences reside permanently at an address approved by the supervising officer' (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024a: 7). Other personal

struggles exacerbated Tyson's housing circumstances:

I had this fine over my head and didn't want bailiffs at my door. They kept ringing my phone and asking where I was. Where are you living? What are you doing? It was constant. Only when I contacted my probation officer and told them about the situation did she say to leave it with me, but the whole thing took 8 months to sort out. (Tyson)

Tyson's probation officer seems to have been an exception. Other participants claimed they received no direct or practical support from probation to assist with their resettlement. Although the process of 'getting the bailiffs off the back' took some time, it allowed Tyson to concentrate on securing accommodation. While Tyson stated he contacted several post-release support agencies to find a place, it is plausible he wanted to avoid paying the fines, as he was already in a financially difficult position and therefore resorted to 'sleeping in parks' and eventually 'staying with friends here and there' until his fines were cleared. In his words: 'As soon as they know I've got an address, I'm in trouble'. Tyson was concerned about revealing his location to the bailiffs, and as he searched for somewhere to stay, the fines weighed on his mind. Despite his difficulties, Tyson remained determined to find a permanent and secure place to live, given the limited post-release housing support.

Jessica, who was the oldest interviewee at 64 years old, shared similar concerns regarding the support available to her:

I'm still sofa surfing, do you know that? I didn't qualify for universal credit or housing benefits. Therefore, I didn't qualify for private rental through the council. But I wasn't told this [...] I'm just actually falling right down the crack of society. The whole process of getting a roof is really tough. (Jessica)

While post-release support services existed, not everyone was aware of the types

of post-release welfare and financial support available to them. Many individuals needed help identifying which support services they were entitled to and which could assist them in resettling into the community. When she was released, Jessica did not feel she had been offered that guidance or the opportunity to gain 'quality resettlement and preparation for real life'. Like Dylan, who had been 'sofa surfing', Jessica ended up resorting to temporary housing with her daughter. However, unlike Dylan, who resided with his friend, Jessica relied on family support to secure housing and financially sustain herself: 'The flat I'm living in wouldn't have happened if I didn't have my family. My sister gave me financial support, and I lived half my time in my daughter's flat'.

The lack of transitional support for housing provision placed some individuals in more socially disadvantaged and vulnerable positions than when they first entered prison. Elias was adopted and had few family support structures growing up. He had been in and out of prison since he was 16 years old and left his home area to escape his involvement in drugs. During that point in his life, he felt that probation was not offering him the support he needed and thought that the only way he could move forward was to live on the streets. Elias was released from Spring Hill after serving nearly four years of his sentence. He told me that the prison authorities said they were going to do 'everything in their power' to make sure he would not leave Spring Hill in the same condition before imprisonment. 'I felt let down because I was promised I wouldn't be made homeless', he told me.

When he left prison, he said that probation classified him as a 'high-risk, violent offender'. However, they 'couldn't talk about accommodation', which had been the root cause of his problems since he was a teenager. I asked Elias what housing arrangements he had in place following his release:

I had an approved premise, which had been contracted for three months. That ran out. Probation said they would sort out temporary accommodation. They put me in contact with an organisation that gave me a link to a rent guarantor company. Now I'm in a homeless shelter, which is temporary accommodation, where they stick you in a room [...] But that time between when my approved premise ran out and before I got this room, I was officially homeless. (Elias)

Earlier, Dylan described how he was made to believe he would have a place to stay through the council, while Sarah thought she was moving back into her family home. Like Dylan and Sarah, Elias was made to believe he would be housed following his release. Institutional aims to 'tackle the root causes of crime' fell short. Instead, Elias seeped through the welfare net of individual support, leaving him in a more disadvantaged position than when he first entered prison. He made clear that housing was 'the hardest thing he had to deal with', and the lack of first-hand probation support intensified his post-release struggles.

Elias explained that he was 'promised that his temporary accommodation would be sorted'. Concerns were made about his past: 'You know drugs, violence, and stuff like that'. Again, it seemed that historical events were considered paramount to probation assessments for housing consideration. Eventually, Elias was approved for another temporary accommodation. I asked him if there were alternative options he had considered to secure accommodation: 'Most estate agents won't even talk to me. Others will ask for £22K in savings before considering me', he said dejectedly. There were also instances where a landlord's deposit of up to 6 months was required. Due to the financial difficulties of meeting the criteria needed to be considered for housing, he had problems being approved by landlords and estate agencies. Elias had never rented before. While he had been given some money to find accommodation, he found renting far more expensive than he could manage: 'A flat has gone up from £750 to £1100. It's ridiculous.

Another advert was £800 plus a 10% fee on top of the rent'. Like many others, Elias believed housing provision should have been arranged before he left Spring Hill. After seven months on licence, Elias secured his private rental accommodation with support from the council.

The approved premise was the only viable option for securing accommodation when a residential address could not be provided. The men and women I spoke with were under a contractual obligation, normally expected to last for three months before their release from these premises. Living in approved premises posed challenges for one woman in particular. Anne had initially lived in one shared approved premise with 14 people following her release. After receiving an extension on her room, she spent six months in the approved premises and hoped to secure more permanent accommodation. I asked Anne about her struggles living in these conditions: 'Probation says they are always busy. Nothing's being progressed. I feel like I have been forgotten about', she told me. She said that 'they do all the work for the needy girls. I can sort my stuff out, so they ignore me'. Anne believed her self-sufficiency and independence had been to her detriment. She felt sidelined in favour of those viewed as more troublesome. The fear of being left behind echoes Jessica's experiences of obtaining housing as 'falling through the crack of society'.

The adverse side effects of residing in an approved premise were perceived as comparable to the lived experiences in the prison environment:

It's not just prisoners who live here. It's people who have been taken out of their homes for domestic violence. I thought I wouldn't see anything more like I've seen in prison, but it's similar [...] When I first came here, ten girls got recalled within the first few months, and now they're slowly getting recalled again. There's a big problem with drugs, and they're running around owing money to these dealers. It's

bloody dangerous. I can't live with people like this, and it's not helping me. (Anne)

Not only were people uncertain about their long-term housing arrangements, but residing within approved premises often ignited traumatic events. Comfort (2016) argues that challenges exist when living with people under the scrutiny of the criminal justice system (see also Miller, 2021). The experiences in the approved premises and supported accommodation point to 'the detrimental consequences of concentrating individuals with relatively fresh criminal tendencies together' (Hassan et al., 2022: 592; see also Doleac et al., 2020). Living in poor-quality housing where alcohol and substance misuse are rife can have a damaging impact on resettlement, well-being, and safety (Maidment, 2006; McIvor et al., 2009). I wanted to understand how Anne lived in the approved premises under such circumstances. To avoid getting caught up in activities that could get her recalled to prison, she removed herself from situations implicating her position: 'I keep myself safe and don't get involved because there are occasions where people try to rope you into a corner and like confide in you. I go to my room', she said. Anne was not expecting to be housed with people she believed were 'cutting corners' and 'getting bad attention'.

Anne had been given an extension. This meant she had been housed in the same approved premises for eight months since her release. Like others, she was on housing benefits and hoped to obtain her deposit money from the council. She explained that 'probation said I can apply for accommodation anywhere', but she believed she was better off being supported by staff in this process. Aware of her predicament, she contacted private agencies and landlords and explained that she wanted to move closer to her family. Specifically, she aimed to move back in with

her partner, but this was not straightforward: ‘Probation asked me about my past and my partner. We were both alcoholics, but we are sober now. He’s got to prove himself to me, and I’ve got to prove myself to probation’. Probation was concerned with Anne’s history with her partner. While they had safety concerns, this did not change Anne’s goal: ‘I plan to find somewhere to live, settle in, and live a normal life with my family again’.

Martina, who was released after serving 14 months in prison for a drug offence, offered another example of the problematic circumstances of residing in shared housing. After her release, probation placed her in a ‘small shared accommodation’. She noticed that a few others who lived there were taking drugs. She claimed she was evicted a few weeks later, as she chose not to report these drug activities. Her eviction had a detrimental impact: ‘As I didn’t say anything, they kicked me out too. I kept my mouth shut because I didn’t want to be involved’. Martina felt she was unfairly treated and was subsequently penalised because of her inability to ‘speak up’ despite compliance with house rules. She was trying to move away from a life associated with people taking drugs. Still, by occupying the same environment, she was implicated in circumstances caused by other people’s bad habits and suffered the consequences.

Eventually, Martina moved to her mother’s place for a few months, ‘sleeping on the floor with belongings in a suitcase because there was no space’. Some months later, she moved into supported accommodation. Martina was given the autonomy to leave and return to the house as and when she wanted: ‘You’ve got the element of freedom, but at the same time, there are curfews in there’. Similarly to the arrangements in approved premises, Martina was expected to be indoors at certain times, but felt more at ease knowing that after many months of

not having stable accommodation and living with her mum, she had more stability: ‘The main thing for me was sorting out accommodation. Having a roof over my head, my bedroom, and an actual bed to sleep in’.

Like Anne, Martina found that moving between different kinds of temporary housing hindered her ability to perform other essential activities, such as securing employment to help her gain more independence. The experiences of this group of men and women put into stark perspective the shortcomings of probation and post-release support services in providing essential housing for people most in need of support to integrate into society.

V. Conclusion

People leaving prison face numerous obstacles when transitioning back into society. The men and women I interviewed were generally pessimistic about their experiences serving their sentences in the community and the challenges they faced during resettlement. Several critical implications can be drawn from their accounts. First, contrary to policy aims, which state that ‘licence conditions must be reasonable and necessary’ (Parole Board, 2022: 1), the conditions were experienced as unnecessarily burdensome and unfair. Such restrictions propelled individuals to adjust their lifestyle to restore aspects of everyday life that they had experienced before imprisonment. It was not so much that they could not go about their lives, but that the restrictions constrained their resettlement endeavours and ability to integrate into society. Being on a licence kept them in a state of unfreedom. Individuals regulated all their decisions, fearing that they would breach their licence and be recalled to prison. They gradually became sensitised to operating meticulously and exercised decisions rationally while policing their

behaviour to ensure compliance with their conditions. Drawing on Crewe's (2011a: 522) metaphor for conveying the sense of variation within prisons, probation is very 'tight', exercising power in a way that 'wraps them up, smothers them and incites them to conduct themselves in particular ways'.

Secondly, how probation supervision is perceived suggests that its way of providing support acts as a guiding service rather than helping individuals overcome specific social, economic, and personal issues (see King, 2013a). Probation, therefore, facilitates 'signposting' for individuals to borrow Elias' term. This method of supervision is underpinned by neoliberal tendencies, which have influenced probation practices since the privatisation of the criminal justice system. Against the backdrop of neoliberal-informed penal politics, probation supervision places the onus on the individual to self-rehabilitate and influence the terms of their sentencing. Such demands raise essential questions about how and to what extent people can and should take full responsibility for their actions. Probation's passive support in helping individuals overcome their difficulties questions the level of accountability expected from them to address their sentencing plans.

Additionally, while it is mandatory to ensure that men and women serving their sentences in the community comply with their licence conditions, probation sites should be made accessible to staff and probationers, as stated in the government's aims for reforming the probation system (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2021). Supervision discussions should facilitate purposeful and productive outcomes that aid resettlement into society. They should move away from solely focusing on retrospective events that occurred in the past or mundane 'tick box' activities that diminish the staff-probationer relationship and undermine trust and confidence in the system. While risk management is central to fulfilling

institutional aims and ensuring decisions can be made about public safety, an individual welfarist approach would ensure that effective interventions and programmes that are meaningful and desirable for individuals are in place to support their transition from prison to society. Dylan's 'help yourself' mentality resonated with many people. A significant portion of the outcomes achieved by men and women took place away from, and even in spite of, the Probation Service and its interventions.

Furthermore, while a plethora of multi-agencies from the 'penal voluntary sector' (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016), such as community rehabilitation companies and non-governmental organisations, exist to facilitate resettlement, they have contributed to 'organisational bifurcation' (Burke and Collett, 2016). Public sector initiatives support some of these community service providers. In contrast, others are facilitated by 'private sector organisations and sub-contracted third sector organisations under hybridised contractual service provision arrangements' (McNeill and Graham, 2019: 368). Despite this enmeshing of welfare and punishment, the participants' narratives reveal a distinction between the roles of the Probation Service and associated post-release support agencies. Probation officers deliver supervision through routine monitoring of activities, while charities, councils, and other community service agencies provide the support aspects of their sentence. In both cases, what becomes evident is a shift away from state regulation of public services and a restructuring of the economy so that individuals take responsibility for their actions, reinforcing the neoliberal impetus to be self-sufficient in the community. Although pathways out of crime are described as a gradual, individual process (Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2004), the Probation Service and associated bodies need to acknowledge that rehabilitation is

about helping individuals and playing an active role in supporting their resettlement journeys.

Thirdly, people's narratives put into stark perspective the failings of probation and post-release support services in providing essential housing provisions to facilitate their integration into the community. The most vulnerable group of participants were those without secure and permanent housing. Those who eventually secured accommodation were often relocated to different types of temporary housing, ranging from approved premises to homeless shelters. Probation and associated post-release support services inadequately addressed individuals' basic needs. This shortcoming raises significant concerns about the post-release welfare structures and treatment for people leaving prison. The lack of transitional support and provision of housing services for individuals demonstrates the inherent limitations of the processes integral to developing and implementing criminal justice and social policies.

The government's vision to ensure that nobody under probation supervision is homeless (Ministry of Justice, 2021b) warrants further attention to adequately accommodate the basic resettlement needs of men and women. While government reforms have targeted support to meet housing needs for people leaving prison (Ministry of Justice, 2020b), tangible support structures are required alongside these reforms to ensure that people leaving prison, who are often living on the fringes of society, can secure permanent housing. This, in turn, would reduce the likelihood of homelessness, provide individual stability, and facilitate the pathway from crime to social inclusion.

Stable housing is crucial for integrating into society and supporting other aspects of resettlement, such as gaining access to healthcare and securing

employment. Housing instability threatens resettlement more than anything else, so even if people engage in programmes where there is homelessness or unstable housing, individuals are more likely to return to prison (Johns, 2018). Housing is, therefore, a concern for many people leaving prison (McIvor, 2019) and having somewhere to go, or as Johns (2018: 211) puts it, ‘a place that is decent’, is essential to assist resettlement.

While participants frequently expressed critical views, they also acknowledged more positive sentiments regarding other aspects of their community supervision. Although these instances were infrequent, they suggest that such narratives were not merely interviewees reporting what they thought I wanted to hear. Instead, they reflected on how supervision both supported and hindered their resettlement.

In the next chapter, I shift focus from the challenges of transitioning from prison to society to exploring the motivating factors that helped men and women rebuild their lives. The inadequacies of the prison and Probation Service highlight the importance of examining how and why individuals can foster their desistance from crime and achieve positive outcomes for their futures.

Chapter 6

Desistance in Transition: Family Ties and Identity Reconstruction

The most important thing for the transition has been the support from my partner, family, and friends. It's knowing that I've got major support. I don't know where I would be if I didn't have that.

I've had to let go of my past. We had all the wallpaper up, and I didn't like it very much. So, I decided to take it off when my partner was at work. Every time I peeled a piece off, I thought you are not in my head anymore. I got my father out of my head. My uncle was abusive, too. I got him out of my head. You're not in my life anymore. That was my transition to moving forward. If I allowed them to remain in my head, I wouldn't be able to move forward. It was a kind of therapy. When I took off the last piece of wallpaper, I felt lifted. I felt alive. I've never felt that way before.

The most valuable thing I've taken away is being true to myself and being me. My family, my partner and my dogs have been important as well. You take each other for granted when you're together for a long time. You live together. You become one. When that person is no longer in your life, you realise their importance. You reflect on your family life when they're taken away from you. When I first came home, I had to deal with a lot of the past. Reflecting on your past helps you move forward. I've had a traumatic past, but I had to let go of it. You have to open your eyes to the past and not be so blinkered, but tough enough to let go. Sometimes, I reflect to show myself what I have. It makes you appreciate what you have now. It gives you positives.

I have changed. When I was with my ex-husband, I could never say no, even though I did everything to protect myself and my children by keeping them out of situations. I've found that I'm stronger because I can say no to people. Before, I would drop everything and be there to help. I always thought I'd do things to make people happy, regardless of how it would affect me. I don't need to do that to feel my partner loves me because I know he loves me. I don't need to be a people pleaser anymore.

(Rebecca, East Sutton Park)

Rebecca is a 58-year-old woman who spent 18 months in prison for a sexual

offence. It was her first criminal offence. She spent ten months in East Sutton Park before she was released. Rebecca's testimony above highlights two critical aspects that facilitated her transition from prison to society: family ties and identity reconstruction. Many of the people interviewed described similar factors as necessary for resettlement and community integration. Rebecca's account reveals desistance as a transitional process. Moving away from crime and rebuilding identity are not isolated events. Instead, people who desist navigate a series of co-existing transitional events. Imprisonment serves as a starting point in this process of self-reflection. It prompts people to think about the kind of life they want to pursue, the type of person they aspire to be, and how they want to be perceived by their families.

King (2013b) has shown how identity reconstruction can be formulated through an 'early desistance narrative'. According to King, a person changes their future outlook by dissociating from the past. This cognitive shift, he argues, provides a foundation for permanent abstinence from crime. In Maier and Ricciardelli's (2022) study with over 50 male former prisoners in Canada, prisons encouraged men to reflect on who they were before their incarceration and who they strived to be. There was a recognition that their identities before imprisonment did not indicate what kind of person they had become. Learning to develop inner strength, 'they sought to create a more positive life for themselves and, by extension, their loved ones' (Maier and Ricciardelli, 2022: 785).

Drawing on that body of work, in this chapter, I highlight that the experiences inside open prisons are indicative of a form of pre-desistance that shapes men's and women's resettlement into society. In building this argument, I pose a series of questions that form the backbone of this research: How do aspects

of imprisonment, such as identity reconstruction and family ties, influence the desistance process? Are these processes the same for men and women? I examine the motivating factors that helped people abstain from crime with particular attention to family ties and identity reconstruction. I highlight how these themes are mutually reinforcing, interconnected, and integral to the desistance process.

In this chapter, I intend to bridge the empirical gap between prison sociology and the literature on desistance. First, I analyse men's and women's accounts of family ties in the post-release context and how their families contributed to their transition from prison to society. Then, I examine how imprisonment provided a space for self-reflection. I illustrate how narratives of self-reflection served as essential modes of identity reconstruction. It enabled men to reflect on their past identities to develop a new identity consistent with their future envisaged self. It allowed women to learn and develop their identities, making them emotionally independent and mentally stronger. I explain how these motivations to change and self-improvement contribute to resettlement endeavours, highlighting the critical but often overlooked transition from prison to the community. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of reframing desistance as a transitional process that can be initiated during imprisonment and sustained upon release.

I. Gender, Family Ties and Desistance

None of the 24 participants I interviewed, eight months after their release, had been recalled to prison. While individuals experienced many obstacles on licence, they all managed to abstain from crime. The fact that nobody was recalled is at odds with recent reoffending trends in the United Kingdom, which show that just over a

third of people reoffend within the first three months of their release from custody (Ministry of Justice, 2023b). This rate increases to almost two-thirds within six months following release (ibid). Over the past few years, statistics have shown a steady increase in the number of people being recalled to prison. This trend most often includes men who breach their licence conditions while serving their sentence in the community (ibid).

The people I spoke with described their family ties as the most critical factor in supporting their transition into the community. For men, in particular, the family was seen as a means of keeping them away from criminal activity and focusing their efforts on reconnecting with their loved ones. I found this especially true for married men and those in romantic relationships. This group of men stated that their wives, partners, and children were the most significant people supporting their integration into society (see also Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2007).

Rory, an Irish national, grew up in a travelling community. His parents took him out of school, and without any formal education, Rory was set up to struggle. He started socialising with the ‘wrong people’, as he put it, to support himself financially and ended up in prison. ‘I blame it all on my parents taking me out of school’, he told me. Rory explained that taking kids out of school was the ‘traditional thing to do as a traveller’. While in prison, he taught himself to read. On release, he started to mix with the same people again. Despite his wife’s attempts to convince him to take a different path, Rory decided to be with ‘his friends’ and was sentenced to 5 and a half years for conspiracy to steal.

When we spoke, Rory had been happily married for 20 years and resided with his wife and children. After this release from prison, he was adamant: ‘This is a new chapter, the last chance’. I asked Rory why things would be different this

time:

I went down to the lowest of lows. Sometimes, you have to go low to find out who you are. Every day, I had pain in my heart. I thought at one point she was going to leave me. That was the lowest point in my life. (Rory)

Learning from past mistakes and fearing the loss of a loved one had been particularly significant. The realisation that his partner stood by him throughout his most difficult moments was a wake-up call to put things right. 'I've been in this situation before where my missus has said don't do it, and I've done it. Now, every time she says don't do it, I don't even let her finish what she's saying because I remember what happened last time'. Rory claimed he had learnt from his experiences and had changed as a person because he 'reset in prison' and thought about how he wanted to do his sentence in the community. Having a job supported his transition into society. 'If I had just carried on with my job, I wouldn't have gone to prison', he said. Rory was working as a builder, a job he did before imprisonment. When I asked him if he was enjoying his work, he responded: 'I'm not enjoying it, but it's work, isn't it'? Who wants to work at 6 in the morning? Sometimes, I could be working 20 miles away. It's a job, though. I'm providing for the family'. Employment supported Rory's resettlement, but perhaps more importantly, it was also a way to show his partner that he was actively trying to change his life.

Rory described his partner as the most influential person helping him 'go straight'. Although he had been out of prison for eight months, he told me, 'I'm still trying to convince her that I won't go back to crime'. I asked him how he was doing that, to which he responded: 'I'm going to keep working. Whatever she says goes'. While Rory was taking steps to turn his life around and prove to his wife

that he would be there for her, it was clear that he was heavily reliant on her support to move away from a criminal past: ‘My wife will keep me on the straight and narrow’.

Several points can be highlighted in Rory’s account. On the one hand, he appears to be aware of the significance of his family post-imprisonment and their role in supporting his efforts to live a law-abiding life. On the other hand, and somewhat less positively, Rory seems to place the onus for his desistance in his partner’s hands. In so doing, not only does he diminish his own, personal responsibility but he also replicates gendered norms that a ‘good woman’ (Barr, 2023; Laub and Sampson, 2001), usually a romantic partner or mother figure, will and indeed should, influence a man to refrain from criminal activity.

Depending on his family, predated Rory’s release. His wife had been an essential factor during his incarceration as well, he said. ‘She stood by me every step of the way. My wife looks after the kids and makes sure they go to school. She keeps the house clean and pays the bills. She came to pick me up, sent money, and cared for me’. Returning to a home with financial stability, where essential needs are met, was a testament to his wife, highlighting the central role of family ties in supporting individuals both within and outside prison (Condry, 2007; Hassan et al., 2022; Kazemian, 2020).

Rory’s case makes concrete more conceptual accounts of how neoliberal constructions of womanhood reinforce heteropatriarchal discourses by requiring women to live up to the ideals of a ‘good woman’, including a ‘good mother’ (Rutter and Barr, 2021). The array of support Rory received from his wife points to a broader set of responsibilities she bore, beyond solely caring for children. It highlights the importance of ‘relational desistance’ (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016),

and the multifaceted role of women's supporting relationships in promoting a law-abiding life.

To reaffirm his position in the community and rebuild his relationships with his wife and children, Rory believed he needed to sever many of his ties with former associates. He wanted to prioritise his family:

I realised that with my parents taking me out of school, I was set up to fail. My kids have done GCSEs and have gone to college. I can't change what I have done, but I can change their path. That's what I'm hoping for. (Rory)

Reflecting on past experiences had served as an 'awakening' (Kazemian, 2020) to ensure Rory's decisions positively impacted his family (see also Crewe et al., 2017). Keen to prove that he had changed, he sought to become a responsible and caring father. Spending time with his children and being visible in their lives was a crucial step in his resettlement journey.

Children also provided a strong motivation for other men to continue leading law-abiding lives. Jason was born in the United Kingdom and grew up in a family with a history of entrepreneurship. His father owned various companies, including taxi firms, restaurants, and nightclubs. Jason spent most of his adult life working in these family businesses. He was incarcerated for multiple drug offences from 2006 to 2015. Jason claimed that his crimes were for 'financial gain' and 'greed', which 'got out of control'. He had been with his wife for 23 years. During his sentence, he went through a 'rocky path' and 'separated from her'. He had four children with this woman. While he was incarcerated, he missed the birth of one of his daughters and two of his granddaughters. He eventually 'worked things out' with his partner on release, and they got back together.

I asked Jason what he had learnt from being in prison. He explained: 'It's

made me realise I appreciate my family more. My lifestyle before was hectic. There was some stability from a financial perspective, but not from me being there'. Jason was largely absent from his children's lives, but coming out, he was adamant to fix things: 'I know I'm going to be home by 4 pm Monday to Friday. I'm going to be home on Saturday and Sunday. Having a routine with a regular job, knowing you have a house to go to, the kids are there, the partners there, makes everything normal again'.

For Jason, the family was the most crucial factor in transitioning into the community. 'Having family support enabled me to stay away from all of my past life'. He knew he had let down his partner and children by missing out on their lives. 'I don't want to put them through the pain and agony again', he stated. While Jason was away from his family, his children had become young adults. This was a critical turning point for him as it incentivised him to 'stay clean'. The fact that his children could now form a judgment on his actions was a deterrent from committing further crimes. 'My kids were younger when I was inside, but now they're older. They tell me, look, Dad, we don't want you to do that. When your kids tell you that, it hits you'.

Reconnecting with children alleviated some of the hardships experienced while on licence. Being with the family at home made people feel secure in their environment and helped them to restore aspects of what they experienced before imprisonment. For men like Jason, who were serving long sentences, rebuilding familial relationships while incarcerated was paramount for their resettlement. While he went through difficult periods with his partner, Jason used open conditions as an opportunity to rebuild their fractured relationship (see also Kazemian, 2020). Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) allowed individuals to

visit their families, and this process helped men to strengthen their family connections in preparation for release. However, I found that the effects of imprisonment on family ties varied. For people like Jason, family bonds needed reconstruction, whereas Rory maintained a relatively stable partnership with his wife throughout his imprisonment. ‘You need a good woman to stand by you for the good and bad times’, Rory explained. His words echo Fishman’s (1990) classic study, in which she found that women play a fundamental and arguably self-degrading role in alleviating the burdens of male criminality, imprisonment, and resettlement.

Being married for a long time increased people’s chances of staying out of prison (see also Bersani et al., 2009; Doherty and Ensminger, 2013). Kang and Kruttschnitt (2022: 385) showed that ‘strong marriage was foundational for respondents in initiating and maintaining trajectories of desistance but did less to protect individuals from a history of drug or alcohol abuse’. I, however, found that while good marriages and strong relationships may have done little to protect individuals before they were first incarcerated, the self-realisation of the damaging effects of incarceration from repeat offences served as a turning point for this group of men. In Rory’s case, his wife financially supported him during his entire sentence. Jason decided that reconnecting with his family was more important than the allure of financial gain. In both examples, abstaining from crime was a transitional process with significant support from family members.

While Jason’s and Rory’s partners were willing to sacrifice themselves and shoulder the additional burden of their sentence, other men found themselves in less fortunate circumstances. Tony had two sons, aged 11 and 18. Before we met, he had spent much of his adult life ‘hanging around stupidity’ and getting in

trouble living the ‘street life’. He explained, ‘I was around too many negative people and wasn’t a family man. My partner kept saying you’re on drugs. She knew it was all going to come to an end, and she was right. I went to prison’.

Like Jason and Rory, Tony wanted to ‘start a new chapter’. After his release, he moved into his late grandmother’s house but returned to the same ‘hood’ with the ‘same faces’, as he put it. Although Tony had a secure home, he was worried about being caught up with old friends, whom he described as being criminals: ‘I don’t know what they’re up to, so I’m careful with whom I let in my life because I can’t get mixed up with all that. History can’t repeat itself’. I asked Tony how he was managing to stay away from trouble, given that he had moved back into the same area. ‘Hello and bye. Keep it moving. That’s it’, he replied. While Tony admitted it was ‘easy to get back into it’, he acknowledged that returning to prison at this stage in life would be detrimental: ‘It can’t happen. I’m not going to be stupid. I’m on licence. If I go to jail now, I’ll be coming out in my early 40s. The boys need me. I need them’. Tony had used his sentence to think about what kind of life his past had led him to. He was embarrassed about the actions that imprisoned him and realised his partner had left him because of them. Tony was still not on speaking terms with his ex-partner, but he acknowledged that he needed to prove to her and his kids that he could be a responsible father.

It was clear that Tony’s children played a critical role in his resettlement. Like Jason, he wanted to embed a routine into his daily life, which involved ‘catching up’ on what he had missed while incarcerated: ‘I just want to work, go home, and see my two boys’. He admitted he was ‘hardly there for his second kid’. I probed Tony on how he planned to build a relationship with his son, especially as he had been largely absent in his life:

I talk to my older one, but my second doesn't really know me. I tried to call him, but he didn't answer when I did. He'll text back saying he's doing something, so it's like a texting thing. I want them to feel comfortable. I'm not a monster. I can only advise them. I don't want to see them grow up the way I grew up. (Tony)

Like Rory, Tony wanted to be a positive role model for his children. He tried to overwrite past mistakes with 'good deeds'. There are resonances here with Boonstoppel's (2019) study, which argued that fathers who shifted their priorities away from themselves and towards their concerns and responsibilities for others were able to move away from crime. Interacting and spending time with his sons indicated that Tony wanted to provide support and be the father figure they lacked growing up. His daily routine now centred on his children and their associated parental duties. That left little time for crime and reinforced his identity as a full-time father (Boonstoppel, 2019). He had begun to think about his future and to turn away from his previous criminal activity (Turner, 2017).

While Rory and Jason sought to rebuild relationships with their wives, separated men like Tony described their children as their top priority upon release. I did not find instances where separated men attempted to rekindle their ties with former partners despite being in contact with their children. These men accepted that their partners had moved on and started a new, independent life.

What was common among the men's narratives was that they recognised the pain they had caused their children and wanted to support them on release. However, this belated awareness was associated with a desire to make amends. Their willingness to interact with their children points to an identity change from 'incarcerated person' to 'father', which LeBel et al. (2008) suggest may lead to an increased likelihood of desistance. This identity change is associated with early-stage desistance (King, 2013b). By healing familial relationships, men became

fathers or partners again and gained crucial, intimate support in their journeys towards desistance. Family ties were thus vital in helping this group of men move away from a criminal past. However, other post-release factors, such as housing, employment, and staying away from former associates, contributed to resettlement.

Women also cited their husbands as the most critical factor in helping them transition back into society. This finding is consistent with other research showing the positive impact of family structures on resettlement (Rodermond et al., 2016). Only one of the nine women I interviewed on release was not in any intimate relationship or had children.

I return to Rebecca's testimony at the beginning of this chapter. Rebecca had served 18 months inside prison for a sexual offence and claimed she had been coerced into her crime. When I interviewed her at East Sutton Park, I discovered she had suffered from trauma and abuse within her family circles at a young age. Following her divorce, she met another man with whom she happily married for 20 years. After a long and arduous period of adjustment to imprisonment, Rebecca felt her prison term had made her an emotionally assertive person. When I asked her what she would take away from prison, she explained: 'Being a stronger woman. I will take a step back and think I've got a choice. I can choose to take myself out of that situation. I didn't have that choice before'. Rebecca spent 19 years with her ex-husband in circumstances she described as 'controlling and manipulative'. Introduced to her husband at age 15, she was taken out of school because she fell pregnant. From a young age, Rebecca felt that much of her previous life with her ex-husband was 'all she knew'. Imprisonment gave her the choice and confidence to make her own decisions.

While at East Sutton Park, I asked Rebecca what she was most excited

about leaving prison. 'I'm looking forward to learning to live with my [new] partner again. We know what it's like to be apart and how quickly it can happen, so we understand that we will enjoy our lives now'. When I asked Rebecca what had been most essential to help her transition back, she mentioned letting go of her past and the support she received from her partner. While support from her husband was critical for integration, Rebecca felt that to move on, she had to dissociate from her past traumatic experiences:

I had to deal with and reflect on the past when I came home. Reflecting on your past helps you move forward. Even though your past could be traumatic, you need to be strong enough to let go of it. I sometimes reflect to show myself what I have now. It makes you appreciate all the good you have. (Rebecca)

Prison had provided Rebecca with space to think about the positive aspects of her life. It also allowed her to alleviate the mental strain that was inhibited by her previous familial experiences and the pains of imprisonment. Self-reflecting made her appreciate what she had in life. At the same time, Rebecca chose to make difficult decisions coming out of prison. She still had 12 months left to serve on licence and was on the sex offenders register for ten years. Consequently, she felt this could burden her kids: 'I've written to my three children and said, I don't want you to be associated with someone on the register even though I'm your mum. I don't want you to have any grief'. Her kids were upset because they could not have contact, but she said they understood why she made that decision. Rebecca sacrificed contact with her kids on release to protect them and their children. She sought a reaction from her loved ones to confirm and certify that she was 'making good' (Maruna, 2001) on her commitments.

Rebecca's partner was described as the most important person in her

transition from prison to society: ‘I don’t know where I would be if I didn’t have my partner. We’re a strong couple. He does everything for me, and what he does for me is not something he can gain from’. It was clear that he played a vital role in helping her settle back home and supporting her during her incarceration. From conversations with Rebecca, I learnt that meaningful interactions made her feel valued and cared for, and this emotional support helped her re-establish herself in the community.

Perhaps more surprisingly, I discovered that children were less prominent in women’s narratives. Unlike the men, the women I interviewed did not depict their children as crucial to resettlement and community integration. The relative absence of children in women’s accounts is at odds with critical scholarship on women’s desistance (Michalsen, 2019), which indicates that women tend to be the primary caregivers (McIvor, 2019) and have more childcare responsibilities than imprisoned men (Bosworth, 1996).

Some factors partly explain the absence of children from women’s accounts. Most of the women’s children were adults who lived independently from them. They arguably did not require the same kind of care expected of a child. When women have children in their care following release from prison, this is usually a motivating factor in their efforts to desist from crime (Sheehan and Trotter, 2018). In this study, none of the nine women interviewed after release lived with their children.

Martina was one of two women I interviewed who had been incarcerated before. She grew up in a fragmented family alongside her two sisters and was sent to England from Northern Ireland to be in the care of social services at age 11. She spent much of her childhood ‘running away from children’s homes’ and ‘getting

into trouble'. Her criminal record began in her teenage years for a drug offence. A 22-year clean record followed this. Martina settled down and had children, but stated that her life 'kind of fell apart'. She 'got in trouble with the police' and was in and out of prison for petty crimes. Martina claimed she was a 'functional user' but was sentenced to just over two years for supply and possession of drugs.

Her two children were incarcerated while Martina was serving her sentence. She asserted that she had 'never learnt anything' from her previous crimes until her current sentence: 'I started to learn about what was going wrong because I had a lot of time to think'. When I asked her what went wrong, she said that although she was part of the issue, the main problem was where she lived and the people around her. 'People asked me for this and that', she explained.

Martina was released into the same area but said confidently: 'I don't want to be in that world anymore'. When I interviewed Martina in her hometown, I sensed she was trying hard to live a law-abiding life. I asked her how she felt being back:

It's nice because it's quiet and relaxed. I can take a back seat for the first time. I don't have to worry about going into shops thinking I need this. I'm just surviving, and all I have adds a bright light. What I'm doing now, I couldn't imagine before prison. I am happier with myself. I was always around people and used to run around for everyone. I'm learning to be happier on my own. I have very little now, but it's more fulfilling. (Martina)

Martina struggled to meet her basic needs. However, she did not want to get into trouble with the law for committing petty crimes, even though she felt there was a chance of getting away with it. Martina said she had changed: 'I've learnt to lock things off. I keep myself to myself. I can't change what happened before. So, forget it and carry on'. She preferred to be alone rather than be around people who could

put her in difficult circumstances and send her back to prison. Like the men, Martina removed herself from former associates. She received financial support from the council, such as universal credit, which covered her rent, but struggled on a small budget: 'I have £350 a month to live on, so I am left with very little'. When I asked Martina how she was surviving, she accepted that she was seeking help in different ways to live a positive life, something she had not been used to doing: 'Thankfully, I don't have to worry about food because my mum is supplying everything'. Martina's mother had been influential in her resettlement and was the only person she turned to for support during times of hardship: 'The only person I talk to in my entire family is my mum'.

I asked Martina how she felt about her children, particularly as her daughter was nearing release: 'If my kids want to get involved in my life, I'm not going to shut them out. But I'm not going to chase them either. If I get no contact, that's up to her. She's not a baby anymore'. Martina stated that if her daughter needed help, she would do whatever was required without going out of her way. When probed about Martina's reason for distancing herself from her daughter, she explained that she was old enough to accept responsibility for her actions and that 'everything is up to her now'. Martina went on to explain that she needed to focus on building a better life for herself and admitted that was something she should have done years ago. The exclusion of her children from her future plans made clear that her pursuit of 'going straight' (Maruna, 2001) was primarily an independent endeavour.

Martina had grown up in the care of social services, with no family structure or stable housing. The difficulties she experienced then were intensified in her adult life by the debilitating effects of imprisonment. Such matters, she said, changed her character, as she had to learn 'how to close feelings off' and 'lock

things out of my life'. Martina explained: 'There's no point in stressing because the only one who will suffer is me'. While Martina's daughter was 21 years old, it is reasonable to argue that she may also experience suffering, given that imprisonment has been shown to exacerbate post-release experiences for women (Segrave and Carlton, 2013). Martina described returning to her mother's home as the 'best thing that happened to her'. However, she did not reciprocate in the same way for her daughter. Martina gradually 'learned to ask and accept help in different ways', but it was not enough to want to provide her daughter with the same level of support.

The family was viewed as providing instrumental rather than emotional support. In Martina's case, the types of support included securing temporary accommodation and acquiring necessities, such as food and drink. Consistent with resettlement and social support scholarship, Martina's journey highlights the pivotal role of social support systems in helping people alleviate the burdens of transitioning from prison to the community (Sugie and Augustine, 2020).

While individuals cited family ties as critical to supporting their transition from prison to society, I found gendered similarities in how they described their families in helping them move away from crime. Notably, men and women emphasised the importance of their loved ones, the solace they took in support from their families, and their determination not to return to prison.

However, some evidence of gendered differences also existed in the narratives of men and women. Children not only featured more prominently in men's narratives but were also described in more favourable terms. For example, Jason and Rory aspired to be good fathers. Being present for their children and supporting their families were all common endeavours for these men. Children

were intentionally detached from women's narratives to reduce the negative impact and labelling on them, as in Rebecca's case. Martina, too, aimed to re-establish her life without being actively responsible for her daughter. Rather than reintegrating their children into their lives, as the men consciously set out to do, women set aside their intentions of rekindling their relationships with their children to focus on getting through the remainder of their sentence.

Furthermore, I observed that men often mentioned how they aimed to 'go straight'. Release from prison was 'going to be different', and this was the 'last chance' they had. Most had been incarcerated before, and indeed, many had been in and out of prison for most of their lives. Therefore, their accounts of themselves were framed within more conventional desistance aspirations. They wanted to 'turn their lives around' and 'live law-abiding lives' by proving to themselves and their families that they had positively changed. The desire and willingness to demonstrate change to others (Nugent and Shinkel, 2016) were more prominent among men.

By contrast, most of the women I interviewed had no prior criminal convictions. They had shorter criminal histories, and their criminal activities differed from those of men. As a result, the women appeared to be less interested in proving that they could abstain from further offending, while men actively sought redemption for their crimes. The burden of caregiving was placed more on the wives and partners of those incarcerated, and they had more of a central role in supporting men in their desistance journeys. This finding aligns with research conducted by Condry (2007), who demonstrates that it is most often female relatives, such as mothers and partners, who take responsibility for meeting the needs of their imprisoned relative (see also Annison and Condry, 2022; Comfort,

2008).

Family ties could not alone explain men's and women's desistance and resettlement aspirations. Like Giordano et al. (2002) have argued, multiple 'hooks for change' must operate simultaneously. Several factors associated with desistance must function in tandem. In the next section, I show that while men and women made a case for the importance of their families in helping them integrate into society, their experiences stemmed from a process of self-reflection inside prison, which profoundly impacted their identity reconstruction and initiated a form of pre-desistance.

II. Self-Reflection and Identity Reconstruction

I've learnt that when you want to stop, you will stop, but you have to want to do that. I don't want to do this anymore. When that finally clicks, it makes you change. I said there's got to be a better way. It's not worked for me. I said I'm done with that. (Mohammed)

Mohammed had served six years of his 12-year sentence before he was released from Spring Hill. He was about two years into his sentence before he realised he no longer wanted to pursue a criminal lifestyle. As he had spent most of his life incarcerated, I asked Mohammed what had convinced him that his release was going to be different this time: 'I don't want that life. I did try before, but not 100%. I was playing the game, but only when I grew up did I realise that 21 years in jail and I've got nothing to show'. Mohammed recognised that he had to change for himself and believed he could do that. His partner had stayed with him during his sentence and thought that although he was taking steps to change, he was changing for the wrong reasons: 'My missus said to me you haven't changed. You're changing for someone but at risk of falling back into the trap'. His partner stated:

‘If you’re doing it for me, you’re not changing’. It took Mohammed a few years to understand what his partner meant by changing for himself.

During his most recent sentence, Mohammed said that he had reflected on his relationship with his partner and how she had stood by him while he was incarcerated. ‘My partner bought a flat while I was in prison. That was all her’, he said. She was the most important person in his life. Being away and unable to support her was a turning point as it made him realise what he had missed and the hindrance his sentence was causing: ‘My missus is more family than anyone. We had to confess to her parents that I got involved in a bad crowd. They knew something wasn’t right because what woman waits ten years for someone? They were happy that we confessed, and they’ve been supportive’. Mohammed was adamant that he had changed. His partner and her family were motivating factors that helped him on his release. He did not want to disappoint them, although he claimed that changing for others was secondary to his needs: ‘I don’t want to do it anymore. There’s no point. Nobody has helped me come to that decision. It just clicked around my mid-30s in the middle of this sentence’.

When I asked Mohammed what the most important thing he had learned from prison, he replied that it was realising that he did not want to live a life of crime and put his partner through more pain and disappointment. This realisation sparked a change of mindset. He understood that there were better options in life than committing financially motivated crimes. With his parents passing away when he was a child and with detached family structures, Mohammed willingly accepted that he only had his partner to turn to and did not want to risk losing the most significant relationship he had left in his life.

Tyson had similar intentions. He used the time inside prison to think about

what kind of person he wanted to become. He had been incarcerated before and served eight years of his current sentence. Just before he was released from Spring Hill, he spoke about wanting to be there for his son. He asked: 'Who is going to bring him up'? Tyson had two daughters and a son, and he wanted to support them. While he was incarcerated, his partner took care of his children. Like Rory, Tyson stated: 'The woman upstairs [his partner] is good as gold. She's been doing everything while I've been gone. If I didn't have her, I wouldn't have anyone'. Tyson felt he had to make up for lost time and change. Yet, he feared leaving prison to see his children:

I tried to be a good parent, but know I'm not. Sometimes, I can barely look after myself. I could spend days and weeks in a corner crying and not wanting to face the world. I know it sounds silly, but this is my comfort zone. This is my safety. I can go out tomorrow, and if I don't want to deal with people, I can go back to my room and shut myself in. Outside, I've got to deal with everything. I've got no deals in here. I've got nothing. (Tyson)

Tyson accepted he had placed his family secondary to his needs, given he had prioritised 'earning money' through crime. He realised that his time in prison was a 'long time for a kid to miss'. However, he was not confident he knew how to be a responsible father. In prison, he knew he no longer had to worry about responsibilities for other people. At the same time, he recognised the importance of being a father figure: 'I'm nobody to everyone else, but I'm someone to my kids'.

I asked Tyson what had changed. He described his mindset before imprisonment as 'resorting to violence' and having problems with law enforcement agencies, such as the police. He felt prison was an 'escape' from the troubles of everyday life. It gave him the space to focus on himself. While he 'carried a lot of

his past with him', he wanted to reflect on his past mistakes to understand how to overwrite them. The time in prison made him realise that his previous life was about financial gain and looking at where he would 'feed the next bit of cash from'.

Tyson explained that:

When you come to jail, you miss your family because they are gone. The only victim of my crime was my family. They're going through the shit now that they shouldn't be. They stayed with me, but now I'm their burden because they're doing my sentence with me. I've put them through that. I was gutted. (Tyson)

Imprisonment, in other words, had provided Tyson a site for self-reflection. Like Tony, he was mainly occupied with his endeavours before prison. He wanted to focus on supporting his children when he was released: 'I want to be there to protect my kids. They've been through a lot, so I don't want to take anything for granted. I want to see them grow up'. Tyson's children were the main reason for his abstinence from crime. After eight months with his family, he realised he no longer needed to 'look over his shoulder'. He admitted that 'things are twice as hard when you have to do it legally' but at the same time recognised that he 'couldn't have it any better' and was content with the life he was living.

While prison provided a space for people to reflect on the kind of person they wanted to be for their families, it also prompted the men to think more broadly about the type of person they aspired to become. Charlie had finished school and worked for a prominent automotive company from the 1960s to the 1970s before getting married. He had worked in his father's decorating company and gained relevant trade qualifications. He then owned a pub and worked self-employed for the remainder of his life. During this time, he met his next wife.

Charlie was one of two people incarcerated for attempted murder. He was

handed a 19-year sentence and was the oldest male interviewee, at 61. Given this context, I wanted to understand more about Charlie's background and offence. He stated that he used to visit the doctor because of 'mood changes' and becoming 'very violent with people'. He claimed he had never been a 'violent person', but his wife would question his actions. He could not explain to his wife why he behaved in such an aggressive way. These episodes went on for nine months before Charlie attacked his wife one night. With a clean legal record and successful employment history, he was assessed on trial and claimed he had been 'suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder' and 'didn't know this at the time'. 'Those mood swings....it all came to light, and I realised why my character changed', he explained.

Charlie was the only sibling who had 'left school with something'. His family perceived him as someone who could 'sort stuff out'. On reflection, Charlie lived a good life and stated that his wives had everything, from nice houses to new cars, because he had worked all his life. He attributed his marriage failure to a lack of love: 'I thought love was giving them what they wanted, and I've learnt that I never showed them any love. It was all material'. Charlie went on to explain that he did not love himself either. As he neared his release, I asked him, 'What is the most important thing you will take with you?':

Prison has given me the opportunity to understand myself and to understand my faults. I did all the courses because I wanted to be a different person. I wanted to be more understanding of others and how they think, especially because I've done psychology courses. I feel like I'm a better person for it. (Charlie)

Self-reflection helped Charlie gain a deeper understanding of his character and prompted him to reflect on his life before imprisonment. Given the severity of his

crime, I probed Charlie on what explicitly led him to believe that he had changed. He replied: 'I had 15 sessions with a psychiatrist to learn how to understand my triggers. I wanted to know the reason why I did my crime. It was finding out about me first, the way I felt'. While Charlie thought he was 'unlucky getting 19 years', he learnt to be a more understanding person.

While Charlie experienced difficulties on release due to his licence conditions, he felt he had left prison as a new person. 'A lot of people knew my wife and that I attacked her. I had one incident outside. I just stayed calm and took it on the chin. Before, I would have just punched him'. Charlie said, 'I wanted to educate myself because I knew I would be in these situations because people took a dim view of what I did'. He felt like a 'different person' because of learning to listen and walking away. 'I'm not going to let someone put me back in prison', he said. Despite anticipating challenging encounters on release, he felt he had a 'positive mind' compared to being inside prison: 'I wouldn't let prison hold me back. They could have banged me up for the whole week, and I wouldn't let it get to me'. Charlie turned negative encounters inside prison into positive outcomes. He accepted that he had to restart his life when released but remained optimistic: 'I've done it before. I went to Scotland on holiday with £400 in my pocket, and within a month, I had my first contract worth 20 grand'. Charlie felt that he had previously experienced living a new life and believed this part of his journey was the next phase of it.

When I interviewed him, Charlie said he had not committed any offences on release. I gathered from the encounters and circumstances in which he found himself, both inside and outside the prison, that he was actively trying to change. 'I've got more interest in life than just going to the pub. I went, and it was fun. I

caught up with friends. Do I want to go this week? No. I'll go when I feel like it, so it feels like a treat'. I sensed a greater degree of control when speaking with Charlie compared to how he had described himself before his incarceration. It was evident that spending nine years in prison had prompted Charlie to think about why he had committed the crime and the reasons for his violent behaviour. Self-reflection on past experiences inspired a change. It motivated him to think about how he could overcome adverse events from the past with positive changes, helping him restart his life.

For the interviewed men, like Mohammed and Tyson, identity reconstruction was not only a means to abstain from crime but also a way to prove to their loved ones that they were better people coming out of prison. The recognition by their families that they were trying to change suggested that imprisonment helped to form a new self-identity to 'make good' (Maruna, 2001). In the case of Charlie, imprisonment facilitated positive self-reconstruction (van Ginneken, 2014). Serving a sentence pushed these men to self-reflect on their lives and seek forgiveness from their families through redemption.

By contrast, women did not discuss changing themselves to 'turn their lives around' or to cease criminal activity in the same way. They also did not feel they needed to change or support their families as men did. Instead, they focused more on discovering new traits within themselves. While most men gravitated towards their families, prison encouraged women to emerge more resilient and with a sense that they could 'beat the system'.

Before she was sentenced, Rebecca claimed she 'could never say no to people'. Her parents taught her to be respectful and always be helpful. 'I would drop everything I was doing, even when I came into prison', she said. I asked

Rebecca, 'What have you learnt from prison, and what will you take away with you'? She assured herself she was an emotionally 'stronger person, a stronger woman'.

Prior to leaving East Sutton Park, I asked Rebecca what she looked forward to on release. She had missed her dogs, but her partner was essential to her life. 'We've got to learn to live with each other again', she said. During their time apart, she had created some distance in their relationship. She explained: 'He's got his habits of being a single man, and I've been a single person living in my little pod area, so we've got to learn to grow together again'. Nonetheless, Rebecca was confident that her relationship would 'grow again'. 'I know we will be fine because we're a very strong couple and we've become stronger since we've been apart'.

Rebecca remained optimistic and was excited to leave prison. However, while she remained hopeful, her release was not as simple as returning home to her partner. Adjusting to life outside prison took time. After three months, Rebecca felt a 'sense of being home'. She struggled to transition from an environment with constant noise and surveillance to 'complete quietness'. 'I've had to readapt to what I have here. I realised that this was my home. I'm not going to be anywhere else but here. It's taken time for it to sink in', she said.

Following her release, Rebecca wanted to let go of the trauma and abuse she experienced in the past. Moving forward in her life meant erasing these negative episodes. 'One of the most important things has been letting go of my past,' she told me. When I asked how she was doing that, she mentioned that she changed things in the house that reminded her of her abusive father and uncle. 'I took the wallpaper off, and every time I peeled a piece off, I thought you're not in my head anymore'. She described this process as 'some sort of therapy'. 'I didn't

feel so suppressed. I turned around, looked at the dogs, and said, Mum is here. I started to cry because it was a release of everything’.

Rebecca had a lot of time to think in prison. I wanted to understand what she learned about herself while incarcerated. I asked her what the most valuable thing she had taken away from prison was. In her words:

Being true to myself. Being able to be me, which is a big thing. Sometimes, I reflect to show myself what I have now. When you reflect, it’s good because it makes you feel that you can appreciate the good. Appreciating all the good you have gives you positives. It makes you a positive person. That’s what I try to do. (Rebecca)

Two important points can be extracted from Rebecca’s quotation. First, being true to herself meant believing in her perceptions. Second, reflecting on the present enabled Rebecca to appreciate what she had and helped detract from her disorienting past. She thought about her partner: ‘When you’re in prison, you reflect on your family life’. She also learnt more about her character and personality while in prison. ‘I look at people and think to myself now that I can take a step back from that person. I can choose to take myself out of that situation, whereas before, I never thought I had a choice’. Emotional independence and the development of new capabilities empowered Rebecca. She gained the confidence to exercise autonomy and make decisions without conforming to the pressure of other people.

Jessica offered a similar case. Like Rebecca, she wanted to be herself. ‘I don’t want to be anybody else other than me’. She explained that she learnt a lot from being in prison, and these experiences provided her with ‘capital’. When I asked her to explain more, Jessica said she had gained confidence inside prison because she could speak more openly and assertively about her experiences. ‘The

more words I say to you, the more I feel firm', she said. Jessica described prison life as being exposed to all the 'skeletons in our society's cupboard', and this 'opened her eyes'. She wanted to apply the knowledge and experience she had gained from imprisonment and felt that it would be 'a waste of five years in prison' if she did not utilise her experiences.

I asked Jessica about her motivation to use her experiences, to which she responded: 'When you find yourself in a situation like this, you start looking for some kind of bigger meaning'. She believed that there was more to her sentence than complying with the prison system and progressing through the regime. On release, she expressed that 'they didn't break me', referring to overcoming challenges endured in prison. Speaking to Jessica and other women reinforced the feeling that they wanted to prove they could do better than what the system offered and exceed stereotypically low expectations of people exiting prison.

Like Rebecca, Jessica had difficulty transitioning from prison to society. She felt that the effects of imprisonment were still lingering: 'It still feels like I'm recovering from a long, nasty disease'. While Rebecca was able to revisit her traumas from the past, Jessica found it hard to confront them:

There are so many different locked boxes that I need to revisit. A charity accepted my case to challenge my conviction when I was in prison. Because it was difficult to interact with them logistically, they gave up on me. They already know a lot, but there is a lot they don't know, which would help my case. For me to revisit and get my emotions into this is traumatic. I'm still not strong enough. I haven't recovered enough to get there. (Jessica)

Jessica was a widow with a small family, including one daughter and a frail mother living abroad. She felt that her character had changed while she was in prison and had become more independent. That experience motivated her to move beyond her

past and create a promising future. While in prison, she had considered the differences between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and stated that she wanted to be on the ‘light side’. ‘It can’t automatically win because light has to be presented’. She said it has to be spoken about and brought to the surface. Jessica wanted to talk about what she believed to be ‘the truth’ of her sentence, and her experiences in the prison system were more important now because she ‘had so much time to reflect’. ‘All you do is sit there and reflect’, she commented. Jessica transferred what she had reflected on during imprisonment to life outside prison: ‘My attitude from the beginning, and still is, the best answer to all the groups of people and institutions is for me to prosper. I mean to be more successful and happier’.

There were differences between men’s and women’s narratives regarding how they described their changes inside prison and their perceptions of their identities upon release. For women, prison offered an opportunity to explore and develop their characters and personality traits. They claimed that prison had made them mentally stronger and emotionally more independent. Unlike men, they did not feel the need to change because of loved ones. In some ways, prison was a safe space for women like Rebecca, providing her with a respite from male violence, abuse, and trauma. Imprisonment allowed women to reassess their self-perceptions in new ways. Their identity change involved learning and self-development in challenging circumstances, and understanding what they could take from prison life.

Women were adamant that they would ‘beat the system’ and ‘come out stronger on the other side’. This particular group of women possessed what Phipps (2014: 34) describes as the ‘ideal neoliberal subject’ as individuals who use adversity and resilience to overcome trauma ‘and make the best of all situations’.

They desired to do better outside of prison because they developed the confidence to understand their ‘true worth’. The determination to pursue new lives for themselves supplanted any motive to live up to the ideals of a ‘good woman’, including a ‘good mother’ (Rutter and Barr, 2021). For men, identity reconstruction involved fundamentally changing their outlook and behaviour, and demonstrating to others that their change was genuine.

In both cases, men and women took responsibility for their positive outcomes. Their identity reconstruction was essential for helping them integrate into the community, and, in particular for men, assisted them in leading law-abiding lives.

III. Rethinking Desistance from Crime: Desistance in Transition

Desistance scholars often concentrate on two theoretical models to explain how people abstain from crime: structural factors that can determine a person’s pathway to becoming a law-abiding citizen (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Sampson et al., 2006; Vaughan, 2007) and the role of identity construction in explaining individual motivations and differences in efforts to desist (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Other studies acknowledge the interplay between structural and individual factors (Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Laub and Sampson, 2003; LeBel et al., 2008). Fewer studies have examined the early phases of desistance. Cleere (2021: 229) argues that ‘the early phase after release from prison will often determine whether or not a person will return to criminality or desist’ (see also King, 2013b), rendering this stage of post-release a crucial part of resettlement.

As I have shown in this chapter, desistance can be best understood as a

process shaped by a sequence of interconnected events rather than a single transition. Analysing why people abstain from crime requires considering a broad constellation of mutually reinforcing factors. The linkage between imprisonment and post-release outcomes is critical to broadening our understanding of desistance. This conceptualisation provides a more nuanced and empirically rich picture of people's complex lives, from the time they first enter custody to their release back into society. While the participants interviewed in this study all abstained from reoffending, both individual and structural factors played a central role in supporting their transition into the community. The examination of identity reconstruction and the role of family ties can be considered a requisite for the initiation of successful resettlement and post-release integration.

Family ties played a crucial role in this early transition from prison to society, providing men with hope that they could transform their lives. Carlsson (2016: 39) contends that individuals who reflect on their pasts and document their lives often want to portray a convincing story despite the 'contradiction, confusion, reversion and indecisiveness of life'. While this observation is mostly accurate, I found that the interviewees' accounts were not as fragmented as this. Participants aspired to show their loved ones that they had changed positively and sought to redeem themselves for the pain they had caused their families. Family relationships were thus perceived as reciprocal. Particularly for men, they relied on family members for support in their transition from prison to the community. They also sought to redeem themselves by making amends for the consequences of their crimes. The family was a key factor in facilitating change.

Furthermore, participants detached themselves from former associates. Like Kazemian's (2020: 189) respondents, some individuals used 'avoidance as a

strategy after release to steer clear of trouble'. They avoided 'old habits' and contact with past associates to prevent reoffending inclinations. Shapland and Bottoms (2011: 274) describe this process as 'diachronic self-control', where individuals limit their actions so they are unlikely to face temptations they cannot resist. This was particularly challenging for people returning to their old neighbourhoods, such as Tony and Martina, who found it more difficult to distance themselves from former associates. For people like Rory, having family support on release helped to 'knife off' (Sampson and Laub, 1997) their pasts, including social ties and friendships, thus providing the opportunity for creating a purposeful identity change (see also Maruna and Roy, 2007). Setting clear boundaries and demonstrating that they had moved on with their lives indicated to their families and themselves that they were consciously trying to abstain from committing crimes again.

The open prison should be viewed as an institution that can shape people's post-release trajectories, including their relationships with others. As men and women visit their families while serving their sentences in open conditions, they can demonstrate to their significant others that they are taking positive steps to lead law-abiding lives. Jason, for example, ensured that on his Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), he started working and visited his family to show them that he was actively trying to move on from his past life. McNeill (2016) defines this process as 'tertiary desistance', referring to the recognition and acceptance of change by others (see also Weaver, 2013). Men were more likely to promise change to their loved ones, particularly as they had children and partners by their side. They aspired to seek legitimacy and validation by attempting to turn their lives around.

Equally important to these experiences was the belief that individuals could learn more about themselves to change and build a better future. While family ties were described by many as the most critical aspect that helped them resettle into the community, interviewees also acknowledged that the prison had provided them with a space for self-reflection. Imprisonment prompted many to pause and reflect on their lives. Narratives of self-reflection served as essential modes of identity reconstruction. They enabled people to reflect on their past identities and develop a new identity consistent with their envisaged future lives. Purposeful identity change was a central precondition for initiating and sustaining their desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001).

Interviewees benefited from prison in many ways. They gained confidence and discovered new interpretations of their experiences of crime and punishment. This was especially true for women like Rebecca, who learnt that she could ‘say no to people’. She began writing a book about her life experiences: ‘I feel that my life story will help others, and I want to give something back to people’. Rebecca wanted to change the common societal perception that ‘people locked away are bad people’ and help others understand that there are ‘good people’ inside prison. Additionally, imprisonment enabled her to discover her ‘inner talent for paintings’, which she used as a way to psychologically escape from the day-to-day struggles of being incarcerated. Meeting other women inside the prison and learning about their backgrounds and cultures exposed Rebecca to people she would not ordinarily meet. Most female participants shared these experiences.

My participants did not attribute the positive impacts to the prison and Probation Service. Instead, the good things in their lives were attributed to themselves, their belief that they could overcome past mistakes, and their ability to

find meaning through incarceration and positively reinvent their narrative and future selves.

In line with research by Crewe and Ievins (2019), women and men suggested that their imprisonment had provided a space for ‘getting clean’:

Three years on my own have changed me. I look at everything differently now. I hesitated before, but now I say no instead of getting roped into something. I’ll feel comfortable saying that rather than thinking it will upset somebody [...] I want to put the past behind me. I used to drink a lot. I look back and think what a waste, just drinking and drinking. You can’t take that time back. I felt I had to change. If I didn’t, I would have been dead by now. (Anne)

Reflection was vital as it allowed individuals to understand their sentences and the need to make sense of their experiences. Like Rebecca, the time spent inside prison led to positive change, prompting Anne to become more resilient and self-aware. While imprisonment was still painful and produced hardships that, for most participants, were exacerbated on release, their narratives suggest that imprisonment can lead to what Crewe and Ievins (2019: 1) describe as ‘narratives of reinvention’ and positive effects on prisoners’ lives. In Anne’s case, she was aware that her alcohol consumption had a detrimental impact on her lifestyle and health. Abstinence from drinking was a way for Anne to reflect on her mistakes, take steps to overcome bad habits, and concentrate on more profound experiences such as ‘being true to herself’ and ‘doing things for the right reason’.

Oliver offered a similar case. He wanted to overcome his drug addiction, for which he was serving an 8-year custodial sentence. Before this sentence, he was still suffering the effects of his heroin addiction. When he started his sentence, he claimed that all he could think about was ‘having another pipe’. Oliver spoke about how prison helped him recover from his addiction and how that changed him. He

attributed his recovery to ‘getting cleaned up in prison’, which deterred him from using drugs: ‘I feel different that I’m no longer high all the time’, he said. Being able to ‘distance’ from drugs and building routines, such as participating in drug awareness courses and other rehabilitative programmes, helped maintain sobriety and contributed to participants’ newfound identities.

In Crewe and Ievins’ (2019: 14) study, the authors argued that people incarcerated multiple times can face a ‘crisis of narrative’, which can spark a shift in ‘moral action’ as prison offers a space for such rediscovery. I also found this sentiment true for participants serving their first sentences. Being incarcerated for the first time was enough to realise they wanted to change. In the accounts of Rebecca and Anne, the prison environment rescued them from their weaker selves (Novek, 2005). By contrast, for men, particularly those serving long sentences and who had been incarcerated before, imprisonment represented a symbolic point of demise - the ‘rock-bottom’ moment in their lives. In both accounts, salvation and transformation directly result from deprivation and pain.

Similarly, Maruna et al. (2004) suggest that an ‘identity crisis’ can prompt prisoners to rediscover themselves and establish new forms of identity, thereby ‘making good’, seeking forgiveness from significant others, finding meaning through punishment, and building hopes for their future. Indeed, my sample of research participants exhibited many similarities to those interviewed by Maruna over twenty years ago in his (2001) work *Making Good*. They, too, wanted to ‘make sense of their lives’ (Maruna, 2001: 7). Their criminal pasts were considered not as a failure but as a ‘necessary prelude to some newfound calling’ (ibid: 9). All spoke of trying to establish a ‘true self’ or ‘real me’, an understanding of their true nature (ibid: 88). For men, this process of self-discovery was frequently described in terms

of ‘making good’ and ‘giving something back’ to society and their families. For women, it was a matter of coming to terms with the trauma and hardships of a troubled past and freeing themselves from external sources, as well as a desire for more lasting accomplishments or ‘something to show for themselves’ (ibid: 100).

Many interviewees had a plan and believed they could reinstate their lives despite the setbacks and obstacles they encountered. They did not give up thinking they could overwrite their pasts, ‘beat the odds’ or simply ‘go straight’. Like the desisters who possess a ‘redemption script’ (Maruna, 2001), their vision of desistance involves a renewal, gaining strength, discovering who they are, or bettering themselves. As Schinkel (2014) reminds us, positive transformation is more likely for individuals when they believe that change begins within themselves. In these examples, the men and women demonstrated that they could develop a new, positive identity and meaning under adverse circumstances. The findings echo Kazemian’s (2020: 177) study, highlighting how identity reconstruction ‘provided a framework for forgiveness’, especially for men, and ‘a sense of agency over uncertain circumstances’. Like the French prisoners, my participants tended to rely heavily on themselves, engage in the process of change under burdensome circumstances, ‘believe in their fundamental goodness, and invest efforts in extracting any beneficial outcome out of their incarceration experiences’ (ibid).

The reconstruction of identity demonstrates that imprisonment can be followed by a period of desistance. Incarcerated men and women can derive meaning from various productive endeavours during their sentences and transform them into positive outcomes. It furthermore underscores that academic scholarship can benefit from paying closer attention to how open prisons can play a more

facilitating role in shaping or reinventing narratives of the self (see Crewe and Ievins, 2019; Liebling et al., 2019; Maier and Ricciardelli, 2022; van Ginneken, 2014) which can support people's transitions into the community and increase their likelihood of abstaining from crime.

Ruminating on past events and engaging in identity reconstruction during imprisonment can encourage a form of pre-desistance. The early precursors indicate a period in which decisions, reflections, and preparatory work are implemented to put the person in a favourable position when released. As men and women progress through the prison system and take advantage of the 'perks' of the resettlement regime in open conditions, they generate a deeper level of introspection and self-dialogue than previously possible. In this process of self-reflection, mental states, which are often characterised by moments that have occurred in the past or events envisaged as taking place in the future, are scrutinised to develop self-understanding. As self-reflection is internalised and processed, it leads to greater self-awareness, a more open mind and empathy. Such attributes contribute to a significant change in perspective within the individual. During this transformation, participants develop a newfound focus and concentrate on matters that will aid their transition and integration into society.

Desistance, then, is not something which ought to be confined to retrospective accounts of how people 'abstained from criminal activity'. Instead, it is essential to understand desistance as navigating a series of co-existing transitional events. As illustrated, desistance can be initiated during imprisonment and sustained on release.

Chapter 7

Future Goals, Aspirations and New Beginnings

If you've got the heart to get up every day and put yourself out there, eventually, everything will fall into place. I get up at 5, go to the gym, and I'm at work by 8:30. I'll stay there until I have to. I'll be there if I have to go in on a Sunday. That's a big thing. You'll appreciate what you have if you're determined and prepared to put the shift in.

As a person, I don't think I've changed a lot. But my views on life, my outlook, have changed. Being in jail has made me realise that it doesn't matter what I would have put my mind to. I would have always been successful because I'm driven. I think that's when the penny dropped because I could have been doing anything and would have been successful. It has to be a decision that you make. Something clicks when you wake up and realise you've had enough. I never looked back. When I went to jail, I was a criminal. When I came out, I wasn't because I hadn't committed any crime in the last seven years.

The new chapter starts when you get into the open jail, and they start releasing you. It doesn't start on the day the sentence stops. It starts when they give you that first ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence). When I got a job, that was my new chapter because it was my new life. I thought, right, I'm out of there and in the big world, albeit only for 10 hours, and I would go back, sleep and come back out again. If you look at it like that, I'm two years in.

I want to be in a bigger house and have financial freedom. I will never leave this area. It's home. I'll try to keep my head down and be nice to everyone. I want to be as successful as I can for my future. I want to leave something for my kids so it doesn't make their lives difficult like mine. I suppose that's what my parents also tried to do for me. I want to let the legacy live on. My dad has always had his own business and has tried to do his best, and so has my mum. They've made mistakes, and I try not to make the same mistakes for my kids because I can see them now that I'm older. I think, well, I won't do that with my kids. I'm going to try a different approach. Up until this point, it has worked.

(Jason, Spring Hill)

When I first arrived at Spring Hill and East Sutton Park to begin my fieldwork, I

was optimistic and excited to learn about the experiences of men and women in open prisons and their transition back into society. After several months of talking about their experiences, I still had much to learn about their stories. A year later, I interviewed the same group of people during three crucial transitions in their lives: just before they were released from prison, immediately after they were released into the community, and finally, eight months post-imprisonment. I interviewed each participant between one and three times over 16 months of fieldwork.

In the testimony above, Jason describes his determination to build a future for himself and his family. His time in Spring Hill allowed him to reflect on and restart his life. During his sentence, he successfully established a routine and practised what he wanted to do upon release. He tried to put his past behind him and move forward so that he could financially support his children in the same way his father supported him. Jason claimed that his new life began when he was able to start working in the community. That opportunity supported his resettlement once he was released on licence.

Jason's experiences highlight a broader point made by many of those I spoke to. Imprisoned individuals pursue ambitions despite significant burdens and hardships. Adversity can encourage them (and us) to reconsider their lives and think about what kind of future we all want from the lives we lead. As Jason's words clearly show, desistance is more complex than simply abstaining from crime. Future aspirations fuel it. A goal-oriented approach to desistance helps explain how some people manage to reshape their lives despite popular beliefs and penal trends, which show that most return to prison.

Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated how individuals' experiences of imprisonment are connected to what happens to them when they are released

from prison. Their transition into society is impacted by the stigma of their incarceration and the struggles they face while on licence, which shape their identity and social relations long after a period of custody ends. Imprisonment does not, in other words, stop at the prison gates. A person's resettlement is continuously shaped and reconstructed by the intimate relationship between the individual and the social structures they encounter.

At the same time, as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, despite the burdens many incarcerated individuals face, men and women can and do take positive steps to rebuild their lives upon release from prison. As Maruna (2017: 6) notes, 'at the heart of desistance research is a very simple idea: people can change'. The participants in this study have shown that this statement is indeed true.

In this chapter, I explore how participants attained their goals and aspirations. I illuminate their motivations, the differences between men's and women's goals, and the factors supporting them. Although most participants were on track to reach their goals, I emphasise how factors linked to desistance and future ambitions are closely interconnected. I describe how a steady process of achieving goals signifies a new chapter in participants' lives. In the final section, I discuss the implications of the findings within broader debates in desistance research.

I. Future Goals and Aspirations

When we met in Spring Hill and East Sutton Park, I asked men and women about their future goals and aspirations. I wanted to understand what they hoped to achieve despite their incarceration and the inevitable hurdles they would face while

serving the rest of their sentences in the community. As expected, some of those I interviewed had no long-term aims. Instead, they focused on short-term plans they wanted to prioritise upon release. The men mainly hoped to spend time with their families, catching up on the time they had lost while incarcerated. They also aimed to find paid employment and achieve financial stability. Those who were more economically secure before their imprisonment and had social security through housing and family ties were more aspirational. In addition to the conventional resettlement goals of securing employment, reuniting with family, and having children, they articulated more ambitious goals, such as moving into larger homes.

Jason had been convicted of multiple drug offences and incarcerated several times. While in prison, his brother ran a successful taxi business. Jason was one of the few who returned to a previous business that was more accessible to self-employed men. While his brother handled the company accounts, Jason's role was in customer service. He said, 'I'm at the front dealing with the drivers and customers'. His goals were to 'keep growing the company' and 'have financial freedom'. Besides owning his own house and ensuring financial security, Jason acknowledged that he profited from his property while in Spring Hill:

Regardless of what happened with me and my partner and whether we got back together, I always had a house to live in. I've been in jail for seven years, and the property accumulates equity every year [...] I want to grow the business to the point where I have financial freedom and eventually move into a bigger property. I want to go on holiday like my parents and do whatever I want with my family.
(Jason)

Jason aspired to continue building on his achievements. In Spring Hill, he expressed excitement and optimism about returning to work and 'learning new things'. He was particularly looking forward to expanding the business, something

he missed out on while incarcerated. Having a job was one of the most critical factors in helping Jason to integrate into the community, and it prevented him from being tempted to commit another offence: 'If I didn't have a business to come back to, selling drugs is where I would have ended up', he stated. Despite having a job, Jason described his past 'survival instincts' as an effort to make an income to get by: 'If you haven't got a job, you're going to do what you know'. I found this narrative of 'doing what you have to do to survive' more pervasive among men who had been incarcerated multiple times and had spent a long time in prison.

Jason had far more resources and assets on release than most people leaving prison. This finding is at odds with resettlement scholarship, which shows that the majority of ex-prisoners face deep poverty issues that deny them and their families fulfilling basic needs and living stable and dignified lives (LeBel et al., 2008). Yet, he remained anxious about the significant changes in his lifestyle and how he would adapt to new circumstances. Even though he was making money from renting his property while in prison, most of his worries remained financial: 'The only thing that changes for me when I get out is my financial responsibilities. At the moment I don't pay any rent. All I have to do is feed myself and put fuel in my car. When I go home, council tax, rent, gas, electricity, TV licence, internet - all these things have to be factored in'. Luckily for Jason, his tenants covered his mortgage.

Nonetheless, Jason's financial circumstances were not straightforward. As mentioned in Chapter 5, Jason's economic circumstances were restricted by his drug offence, which limited his earning potential. Although he was imprisoned, Jason was fortunate as he could benefit from the assets he had gained before his sentence. This included expanding his business and aspiring to purchase a bigger

home and travel abroad. These goals were far removed from most of the men I spoke with. They were also in stark contrast with the many individuals leaving prison who suffer from material deprivation because of unemployment or the absence of social assistance required in the early transitions from prison to society, particularly the first weeks or months after release.

Most men hoped to make a positive impact on their lives. They said they wanted to avoid repeating their past patterns and mistakes. They appeared motivated and looked forward to a new future, for which they were prepared to work. For example, Tyson, a father of three, was excited about returning home and spending time with his partner and children. He knew a steady job was going to be essential to support himself and sustain his resettlement:

I'm looking forward to returning to work and seeing my baby ones. I've told myself I have to work. I'm happy if I have to work 20 hours a day, and the other 4 hours I'm sleeping. I have to drain myself physically. If I sit and do nothing, I'm finished. (Tyson)

Tyson described himself as a 'grafter' and enjoyed 'putting in a shift' to earn money. Paid employment was also a way to keep himself occupied. He struggled with the pains of prison life and was worried his imprisonment would mar his experiences of release: 'Prison is designed to fuck you mentally and physically. If you survive to the end, it's still a fight, a fight that they will not prepare you for'. Indeed, Tyson's struggles on release were apparent. He had limited resources to integrate as he was released without housing or employment. Nonetheless, he persisted and eventually found work. With significant support from his wife, he moved back to live with his children.

Men often spoke of shared intentions and purpose. They believed they could overwrite their pasts with positive futures. They spoke of 'beating the

system' and proving they had changed. Mohammed typified this view. He had been in and out of prison most of his life, but this time, he was adamant about putting his past behind him and enjoying a fresh start with his wife. When asked to describe what he was most looking forward to on release, Mohammed stated that he was 'excited about seeing his wife. That's about it. Not really much more than that'. He had secured a job in the gas safety industry through a childhood friend. 'He'll teach me everything he knows. ROTL-wise (Release on Temporary Licence), I got that job. It has nothing to do with the prison system. I've had to find out and talk to a friend', he told me. Mohammed felt proud that he had secured employment on his own accord.

When I interviewed Mohammed following his release from Spring Hill, he was undertaking employment training for two months. Although he already had a qualification, he had no experience in the gas industry. This period appeared to be a critical turning point in Mohammed's life since it was the first time he was working as a full-time employee: 'I've had the job of being a criminal all my life, a jack of all trades, but I've never really held down a nine to five job. This is the first time I've become a civilian working a nine-to-five job'. Mohammed knew he was entering unfamiliar territory that would require new ways of living. He recognised that to progress and succeed, he had to be 'hands-on' and 'understand the trade' and the 'mechanics of it all'. He further explained: 'They said if I can give them some time, I can get a qualification. I should earn a decent wage when I finish training, hopefully setting me up for the future'.

I asked Mohammed if he had always planned to work in this trade. 'The job is exactly what I want to do now because it is exciting. I'm learning something that I want to do'. He had plans to stay in this job for the long term: 'In two years,

I'll still be in this trade because I want to do it'. Whereas if it were something else that the prison told me to do, I wouldn't do it'. It was clear that Mohammed rejected authority. This was due to the negative encounters he had with social control agencies in the past. However, self-worth and determination were essential to him as he wanted to 'do better for himself' rather than rely on what the prison and probation system offered. He knew he had to make sacrifices, such as being on a low wage, but he relied on his savings to support himself.

Over time, I observed positive developments. Mohammed described learning on the job, taking on new responsibilities, and benefiting from the training he received. His manager's salary motivated Mohammed to complete his training and continue developing his skills and experience in the field: 'I'm seeing what my boss is earning. I'm over the moon in two years even if I earn half of what he's making'. Although Mohammed was on a low salary, he viewed his sacrifice as temporary, a stepping stone towards achieving longer-term financial security.

Mohammed went on to complete his training and, as planned, became a gas safety professional. When I asked him about his aspirations, he said, 'Within five years, I plan to take this trade with me and go to the UAE (United Arab Emirates) with my wife. First, I want to market myself and become self-employed'. During the research period, Mohammed stuck to his goals, from pre-release to post-release ambitions. While I cannot know what the future will hold, his successes thus far are notable and suggest the possibility of meaningful change.

Unlike Mohammed and the other men, the women I interviewed did not express a desire to get a job or rekindle family ties. They had more diffuse ambitions. When I asked Jessica about her goals in East Sutton Park, she told me she wanted to pursue knowledge and education. She intended to use her

experiences in prison to help vulnerable and marginalised women in similar circumstances. She refused to accept any job for the sake of it.

Jessica had commenced a master's degree in creative writing inside prison. She was passionate about education. The opportunity for self-growth her degree gave her became central to her resettlement. While COVID-19 restrictions and the lack of computer access in prison prevented her from finishing her degree while incarcerated, this did not stop Jessica from learning as she pursued other jobs and courses, knowing that her degree would have to be postponed until release. From taking on various jobs, such as gardening and cleaning, Jessica did not waste time in prison. She was determined to be proactive and help others during her sentence: 'People were on the streets and didn't have elementary clothing, bras, knickers, essentials. So, I got this campaign running and generated big sacks from my friends, which were delivered to the prison'. Instead of going to a charity, Jessica believed that this clothing would help disadvantaged people. Due to security reasons, however, they were eventually taken to a charity shop. While this commitment fell short, Jessica had good intentions to help others.

Having spent almost two years in East Sutton Park, Jessica stated that she had completed every course available. She wanted to do something purposeful and constructive with her time rather than limit herself to what the prison system was offering:

Nothing was challenging for me. Staff always pushed you to do things that were suitable for the prison. Do you want to be a driver? No. I want to do something for myself because my focus is on resettlement. It was important to challenge myself and do something meaningful and measurable. (Jessica)

Although Jessica focused on things that mattered to her, she was in a difficult

situation. When Jessica accepted the offer to undertake her master's degree, she had difficulty doing this in East Sutton Park: 'I wrote the whole story of my life to the prison. They had a big committee with all the heads. The university wanted to interview me because of my unusual situation'. Jessica had 'such a lively conversation for the first time in years'. Her enthusiasm was muted by the prison's decision to disallow computer use. She explained, 'if you are free from the duties you have to deliver, like cleaning the prison, then you can use the computer'. On the surface, it was strange to hear that a resettlement regime, which is supposed to help prepare women for life outside and give them the best possible chance to integrate into society, would dismiss the opportunity to support educational ambitions and promote a good case study for the prison:

I asked the staff what was important to them. For me to return and be a functional human being or have your cupboard cleaned? (Jessica)

Jessica's question to prison staff sheds light on how open regimes support purposeful resettlement. With determination to 'beat the system', Jessica subsequently received support from a woman responsible for education and community work, whom she described as 'someone that cares'. She stated: 'You have to fight a lot to get there, but we made it work'. Since the prison had not been in this position before, persistence and willingness eventually enabled Jessica to begin her master's degree. Her case proves that educational achievements can occur despite setbacks and when the odds are stacked against the person. While Jessica had to overcome many hurdles, she felt the prison was 'still the best place to do the master's because you don't have any other disruptions'. She had the time and space to focus on her writing. With books sent in, making her 'own library', she felt that she was 'in the zone'. Jessica was excited about the prospects of

completing her degree following her release. I asked Jessica what she was most proud of:

I'm proud of my master's. I started my master's in prison and finished with a distinction while sofa surfing after I left prison. Prisons and probation officers should use this as a case study, but they don't look at your achievements and the positive things. (Jessica)

As we saw in Chapter 5, the probation system employs risk-based models that focus on past deficits rather than individual strengths and future goals. While Jessica was proud of completing her master's degree, she resented the system for making it a burdensome process, as it did not create an environment that enabled her to flourish with the required resources. Jessica described her educational achievement as 'sticking up the middle finger'. She explained: 'Doing my master's was like my way of saying up yours'. Jessica not only shocked the prison system by graduating with a distinction on release but also surprised herself. She described her experiences as 'overwhelming' and 'a miracle', given the circumstances she found herself in. 'It wasn't just learned because I know so much about my life experience', she told me. Completing a master's degree was not just an academic endeavour. It underpinned fundamental values and subjectivity that Jessica attributed to her personal experiences within the prison and probation system. In her words: 'I'm trying to make the most of life, and my belief system supports this. I believe there is always an option to turn adversity into opportunity'. Like Mohammed, Jessica went on to do precisely what she set out to achieve. While they had different paths and goals, their mindset of 'beating the system' and 'going alone' was a shared sentiment.

Jessica and Mohammed were adamant that they had to take matters into their own hands. While they experienced setbacks and obstacles, often initiated

while in prison and intensified upon release, they demonstrated that life goals can be fulfilled even when the chances of achieving them seem bleak. Turning unfavourable circumstances into positive opportunities can be explained by the concept of ‘grit’. Grit is defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016). In pursuing individual aspirations, grit resulted from individual endeavours and success rather than resettlement initiatives within the prison, Probation Service, or post-release support services. An optimistic future outlook supported post-release integration. Research indicates that confidence in the future is associated with actual desistance (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Doekhie et al., 2017; Souza et al., 2015). Villman (2021: 95) argues that ‘optimistic desistance expectations are closely intertwined with other changes that prisoners aspire to, and these expectations are often framed as aspirations for creating a conventional life’ (see also Doekhie and van Ginneken, 2020; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). Most people I interviewed aspired to live conventional lives. Their goals could arguably be conceptualised as modest. Maruna (2001) highlights how being recognised as a conventional person is a key indicator of success in becoming a law-abiding citizen.

Elias was adopted as a child, but with limited contact with his family, he ended up living on the streets and turning to drugs. He felt no one was helping him and wanted to ‘change his life’. He had been in and out of prison since his teenage years. Before his release, I asked him what he was looking forward to: ‘Doing something purposeful, working, life coaching, setting up my business and stuff like that’. When he was released into approved premises, his plans remained the same:

My plans are straightforward. I want to get full-time work and set something up on the side, like an online business. I will continue my social media projects and hopefully launch a few more. I hope to

assemble and launch a registered organisation in six months. I want to settle down, get married and build a family. (Elias)

Elias described his life as ‘plain and boring’, but like others, he claimed that what he had achieved so far had been through his initiative: ‘I haven’t got that sort of silver plate. Everything that I’ve found and done has been through my willingness’. While he struggled with housing, which he described as ‘the root of his problems since he was 14 years old’, Elias’s two most important goals were having a family and working. ‘I’m not setting my goals too far. I’m keeping it simple, realistic, and achievable’, he said. I further probed why Elias did not want to set far-reaching goals. Given the fractured nature of his lifestyle and its lack of stability, it became clear that he decided to keep his goals fluid, allowing them to be amended as the days passed. ‘They are scribbled in pencil so I can rub them out. I keep it simple. I reflect on the day and think about my intention for tomorrow. I take each day as it comes. I try not to plan because anything can happen’. Elias wanted to live a ‘simple life’ following a ‘hectic and chaotic’ lifestyle, which he did not want anymore.

Now nearing 40 years old, Elias wanted to ‘catch up’ like others, earn money, and ensure he could provide for his future family. Having been incarcerated, Elias aimed to ‘do things right this time’ and ‘take responsibility’. He accepted his duty when he went to prison and reflected on what he wanted to do and who he aspired to be: ‘My actions are my actions alone. I don’t try to blame other people. I don’t try to make excuses. I’m trying to mature. I want to be self-sufficient and law-abiding’. Elias was determined to start a new life and was committed to achieving his goals. I found that those with limited familial support structures had more modest and traditional aspirations than those with family

support and social networks.

When I asked people what kind of person they wanted to become, most aimed to live a ‘normal life’ and be ‘a good person’ (see also Kazemian, 2020; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). Although many were enthusiastic about leaving prison and had clear goals, they felt anxious about serving the rest of their sentence on licence. Some set short-term goals to help manage the daily challenges, anxiety, and pressure they faced. Over time, individuals developed a sense of optimism and clarity about what they wanted for their futures. Despite concerns about re-entering the community, many I spoke with achieved positive growth by defining what they considered a ‘good life’ for themselves (see also Kazemian, 2020). At the heart of their aspirations was a sense of hope. Hope for the future ‘provides people with the vision that an alternative “normal” life is both desirable and, ultimately.....possible’ (Farrall and Calverley, 2006: 192-193).

There were similarities between men’s and women’s future aspirations. Their core goals remained consistent throughout the sixteen-month fieldwork period. Most had clear intentions regarding what they wanted to prioritise upon release and in the future. Many individuals I spoke with had either achieved some of their goals or were in the process of doing so. To reach their goals, they shared a mindset that they could succeed and learnt through self-reflection what was essential for them to help prioritise after release.

While many interviewees shared common hopes and dreams for their futures, there were differences in what men and women prioritised. Men tended to have more conventional goals, such as getting married, having children, and building a family. Most men were already married or planned to marry and settle down. In contrast, women did not mention their families as part of their plans in

the same way. Work was also a significant priority for men. Although most participants secured new jobs upon release, women's employment goals were influenced by their experiences and insights gained while in prison. Men had no intention of maintaining any ties to the prison system; they wanted to move away from their imprisonment, though this was challenging as they were still on licence. Conversely, some women, like Jessica, aimed to turn their prison experiences into employment opportunities. She sought to leverage her background in a criminal justice setting, believing she had more to offer after being exposed to the prison and probation system. For this group of women, they focused on jobs that held a meaningful and personal significance.

The structural inequalities and barriers to post-release integration help explain the differences between men's and women's goals. It is too simplistic to say that women had more 'complex needs' to address. However, women's accounts indicate that they faced higher levels of past trauma and abuse, often involving their families. These incidents partly explain why women did not prioritise family ties in the same way that men did. Conversely, men were more financially motivated, and their drug offences somewhat account for their desire to demonstrate positive change to themselves and others. In both cases, future goals and aspirations are part of broader lifetime trajectories shaped by past experiences, including complex levels of structural disadvantage, injustice, oppression, poverty, and repeat incarceration. Therefore, resettlement ambitions and structural inequalities must be understood together, as they 'rely on each other to function, and thus cannot be fully understood in isolation' (Bunn, 2019: 5).

Although many participants had achieved some of their goals, and others were working towards them, this steady progress signalled the beginning of a new

chapter in people's lives once they were released from prison.

II. Beginning a new chapter

When I interviewed people immediately after their release, they had undergone significant life changes. Considering these changes, I wanted to find out whether they believed they were entering a new phase of life. Most women and men described their release as the beginning of a new journey. In Tony's words:

I'm starting a new chapter. I don't want to see the bad crowd anymore. Even though what I was doing was illegal, I thought about everyday life, but it was too late [...] Now, I do my shift, finish my delivery, go home and sleep. I want to make the most of it this time and do things properly. (Tony)

Having a routine and distancing oneself from those who negatively influenced their life was part of the journey towards living a law-abiding life. As demonstrated in Tony's testimony, working and establishing a structure in his life fostered a sense of stability and purpose. Tony believed he was beginning a new chapter. Since his new life was a stark contrast to his previous way of living, it provided him with a fresh perspective on life, which he regarded as an opportunity to make amends for his past. Tony stated that when he was in prison, he had to start anew: 'I definitely need to start a new chapter when I leave'. He was determined to 'work, go home and spend more time with his family'. Tony showed that he was taking positive steps to spend quality time with his children and move away from his former lifestyle. For people like Tony, starting a new life was not only desirable to integrate into the community but also essential to maintaining their desistance from crime.

Jessica shared a similar perspective, even down to the terminology. She was firm that her life would be different: 'It's a new chapter and a better one. In the

context of my entire life, it is a better chapter'. She claimed she had 'been through a lot'. Jessica was now 'trying to make the most of life', which was supported by her interest in gaining knowledge through completing her master's degree and her passion for improving social justice for women in the criminal justice system. While she was afraid of the trauma resulting from past experiences, what she described as 'opening the skeletons in the closet' when speaking about her conviction, Jessica felt she could now 'go left or go right'. In prison, she described going 'into a tunnel and only looking forward'. Her mindset was focused on surviving the pains of imprisonment, confronting immediate challenges, and taking each day as it came. Now, Jessica felt she could manage her circumstances and was in greater control than she had been in the prison environment.

Eight months after being released from prison, most of the people I spoke with used this kind of language, referring to new chapters, paths, or starting a new phase in their lives. They also aligned with their visions of what their new lives would look like after release. Most described this period as one where they would move away from their 'past' and engage in activities that were often new to the participants.

While most endeavoured to overwrite past negative experiences, I discovered that the beginnings of a new life often occurred during their prison term. I return to Jason's passage with which I began this chapter. Jason claimed he entered a new phase of his life during imprisonment. 'The new chapter started when I got a job in prison, and they started releasing me because that was my new life. It doesn't start on the day the sentence stops. It starts when they give you that first ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence)', he told me. Such opportunities had prompted meaningful change, which ultimately made the transition into the

community easier for Jason. Not only did the job reduce his temptation to commit a crime, but its requirements initiated a routine that he then maintained on release. Together, such matters enforced behaviours that increased his ability to set and meet new goals and aspirations. ‘Having a job keeps you focused and that’s what enabled me to find it easier when I got out’, he said. Jason explained that working put him in ‘good headspace’ when he was released and allowed him to ‘think about the things that mattered’ in his life.

Although men and women valued the factors aiding their community integration, such as employment and rekindling family ties, they insisted that beginning a new chapter could only truly start once their licence had ended. Rebecca’s excerpt is an illustrative example:

In some ways, I’m starting a new chapter and trying to move forward [...] I’m 95% there, but the other 5% still feels tied because I’m on licence. You’ve got one hand tied behind your back because probation won’t let you be spontaneous, or you’re too frightened to be spontaneous in case there are repercussions. That’s why I’m waiting for my licence to end. I’ll be a free person then. (Rebecca)

Many people still worried about being held back from achieving their goals. Indeed, as we saw earlier, it took Rebecca several months to settle into the community and establish a routine. It was not easy or immediate to meet new people, go shopping, and feel relaxed, despite the fact that she was in her environment rather than in prison.

Part of Rebecca’s future goals was to rekindle her relationship with her partner, who had supported her during imprisonment. ‘What I’m most looking forward to’, she said, ‘is rebuilding the foundations again and having a brighter future with each other’. When I asked Rebecca what a brighter future meant to her, she stated that she wanted her life to be more colourful. In contrast to

imprisonment, which she described as ‘black’ and ‘clouding memory’, a colourful life meant ‘going on adventures and being spontaneous’. However, she felt that her licence prevented her from living a spontaneous life. She described being on probation as ‘treading water’, a fear of unintentionally breaking the law. ‘Once the licence is finished, I can breathe and focus on our lives’, she explained.

Mohammed shared a similar view. As noted in previous chapters, he was working in the energy sector as a gas safety engineer while living with his wife. He lived in London but was determined to leave the country. When I asked him why he wanted to leave, he explained that he aimed to ‘break the cycle’, referring to moving away from a life of crime to ‘making new friends, positive people on a good path and starting a new chapter’. Mohammed sought to build social ties with law-abiding individuals with good intentions. To him, establishing normality involved making plans for his future. However, he was again clear that regaining a sense of normality could only be possible once the licence had ended: ‘You’re trying to have a clean slate and start a new chapter, but with all these restrictions, I’m terrified of being recalled’. While employed in the industry he wished to work in, he believed he would remain in the same field in two years. ‘I’ve chosen this because it is what I want to do, not what the prison has told me to do. In two years, I’ll still be in this because I want to do it’, he said.

While Mohammed intended to work abroad in the future, he still believed in working while on licence to gain experience and save money, turning that ambition into reality. Unlike Rebecca, who was more insistent on waiting for the licence to end to pursue other desired activities, Mohammed’s desire to work towards his goals was a vital part of rebuilding an important aspect of his life before imprisonment. At the same time, Mohammed was determined not to let probation

obstruct his employment ambitions. Although Rebecca and Mohammed were aware of their licence and the possible consequences of breaching conditions, they continued to pursue their goals.

III. Conclusion

Most of those I interviewed had achieved some of their goals; all still had others to pursue. I found these aspirations were connected to their desistance efforts. For example, men who sought a better-paid job viewed employment as vital in helping them integrate into the community. The link between desistance-related factors and future goals is crucial because it helps us understand how these elements are closely connected. Desistance efforts can be aided by having clear plans and objectives. Additionally, having such ambitions influences desistance outcomes.

The inability to achieve ‘early goals’ (Aresti et al., 2010) means that people can lose hope, which can displace the ambitions that have formed inside prison. Conversely, the ability to achieve goals shortly after release contributes to desistance, giving people hope and aspirations, which was particularly pertinent to the lives of those I interviewed.

While men and women stated that their goals were necessary to aid their integration into the community, it was equally important to them to remember that they were still serving a sentence. As such, they also prioritised ensuring they complied with their licence conditions to avoid being recalled to prison. In some cases, men in particular were willing to risk being implicated by their licence to obtain their desired job. In all accounts, people believed their licence held them back in some way from the life they wanted to pursue. Despite this hindrance, participants thought it was essential to comply with the licence conditions to exert as much freedom as possible. The fear of returning to prison carried a similar

weight to the prospect of earning an income upon release.

There were subtle differences between men's and women's accounts of how they described beginning a new chapter after leaving prison. Women spoke about starting a new chapter, while men said they needed to start one. Men felt a duty to themselves and their families to begin a new life that would erase their negative pasts. Women were more confident about starting anew, developing a fresh confidence in their ability to make decisions that could positively influence their lives. What was common across both men's and women's narratives was that starting a new life was mainly driven by their hopes and ambitions for the future.

Notably, the findings in this chapter reveal that men and women serving their sentences in the community are committed to continuing their pursuit of goals and aspirations despite the restrictions they encounter. While there are nuances between the factors men and women prioritise upon release, they share a motivation to achieve what they consider to be significant to their lives. From this perspective, being aware of a future path and taking the necessary actions to reach goals that will support that person on their journey indicates a sense of agency and control (Maruna, 2001). Jason's case demonstrated that a new chapter can begin inside prison, and this shows signs of early-stage desistance, including setting new goals and actively taking steps to achieve them.

In the next chapter, I highlight the significance of the research findings and their implications for future scholarship into desistance and resettlement.

Chapter 8

Penal Policy, Neoliberalism and Positive Growth

Since completing the fieldwork for this study, several notable changes have taken place in the penal landscape. On 4 July 2024, the Labour Party achieved a landslide victory in the British general election. With a new administration and shifting national priorities, the Labour Party adopted a ‘mission-driven government’. A mission-driven government concentrates on measurable long-term objectives that ‘provide a driving sense of purpose for the country’ (Labour Party Manifesto, 2024: 1). Part of Labour’s criminal justice reform mission is to ‘get a grip of our prisons and reduce reoffending’ (ibid). While this may seem familiar to the aims of the previous Conservative government, prisons in England and Wales have reached a crisis point. Rising prison populations, staff shortages, and fiscal constraints have all contributed to the challenges of maintaining a stable prison system.

To ‘defuse the ticking prison time bomb’, Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood set out the government’s plans to mitigate the ‘impending collapse of the criminal justice system’ (Ministry of Justice, 2024d: 1). With the prison population reaching close to its operational capacity, the Justice Secretary explained that the government had no choice but to make this decision:

‘There is now only one way to avert disaster. I do not choose to do this because I want to....but we are taking every protection that is available to us....let me be clear, this is an emergency measure. This is not a permanent change. I am unapologetic in my belief that criminals must be punished’ (Ministry of Justice, 2024d: 1).

During her speech, the Justice Secretary reinforced her obligation to ‘tackling the prison crisis for the long term’ (Ministry of Justice, 2024d: 1). Part of these commitments are to build new prisons at a pace, introduce broader system reforms,

which consist of a 10-year capacity strategy, including the publication of an annual statement on prison capacity. Such commitments are being implemented to ensure that the government will be held to account for ‘keeping dangerous offenders off the streets’ (ibid). Acknowledging these challenges, plans are also underway to ‘recruit over 1,000 additional trainee probation officers by March 2025, allowing for greater oversight and management of offenders once they leave prison’ (ibid).

The language in the government’s narrative indicates that public sentiment has remained unchanged on crime and punishment. Phrases such as ‘criminals must be punished’, ‘keeping dangerous offenders off the streets’, and ‘oversight and management of offenders’ (Ministry of Justice, 2024d: 1) reflect the punitive discourse that has dominated the penal field since the conservative shift of the 1970s. During this period, there was a focus on risk-based managerial discourses and practices (Bottoms, 1995; Feeley and Simon, 1992; Garland, 2001). Successive conservative governments from the early 1980s to the late 1990s promoted the strengthening of punitive aims of imprisonment (Sim, 2009) rather than encouraging the rehabilitation of prisoners.

Contemporary penal policy and practices remain largely unchanged. The government continues to use the ‘tough on crime’ rhetoric, but this is underpinned by the neoliberal agenda, which gained momentum in Britain during Tony Blair’s administration. There are clear echoes in the current Labour Party Manifesto, which has adopted significant elements of the neoliberal agenda. A highly punitive approach to punishment, closely aligned with the ‘law and order’ ideology (see Cavadino et al., 2013) and reflecting the growing public demand for increased security (Coleman and Sim, 2005; Cotton, 2000), has re-emerged in the penal sphere.

My interviews reveal that prison and probation practices are shaped by the socio-political context in which they exist. As other penal scholars have outlined in similar ways, punishment reflects as much as it shapes the political landscape (Cavadino et al., 2013; Melossi, 2001). Specifically, this thesis suggests that neoliberal tendencies have an influence on prison and probation practices. As a result, risk-based managerial discourses and practices have primarily replaced rehabilitative interventions. The empirical findings indicate that prisoners are openly regulated and monitored throughout their transition from prison to society. Penal practices and rules are used as statistical tools to manage levels of probability, such as the likelihood of reoffending and risk levels for many prisoners (Cheliotis, 2006), rather than focusing on purposeful resettlement that could have a lasting positive impact on their lives. We should adopt a more person-centred approach to understanding the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals as human beings, not just potential risks. Standardised risk assessments often fail to capture individual needs because lived experiences inherently characterise these needs and do not easily lend themselves to measurement.

Such neoliberal penal logic has individualised the prison and probation systems, placing the onus on individuals to self-rehabilitate. Writing some time ago, Bottoms (1980: 20) noted that neoliberal sentiments contributed to ‘the abandonment of the rehabilitative ethic which has led to the widespread abandonment of hope’ because the very purpose of rehabilitation was an expression of optimism about human nature. While the core idea of this statement remains true, this thesis has shown that rather than the complete disappearance of rehabilitation as a penal priority, contemporary rehabilitative practices and interventions have instead been shaped by the cultural conditions fostered and

reproduced by the demands of neoliberal socio-economic policies. This restructuring of the economy compels individuals to take personal responsibility for their actions and be held accountable (Harvey, 2005). The neoliberal agenda encourages men and women to self-actualise through their labour. In this framework, individuals are portrayed as primarily responsible for their resettlement and desistance efforts.

While I have suggested that neoliberal tendencies influence prison and probation practices, the testimonies in this dissertation also reveal that men and women aim to become successful neoliberal subjects. Men were more individualistic in their activities while in prison, mainly focusing on preparing for their community transition and rekindling family bonds. Women focused on learning new skills and took advantage of the regime's opportunities while helping others in prison. Sarah assisted her dyslexic and autistic friend with administrative tasks, while Nina supported women with mental health issues. Women were more 'generative' in their concern for others' well-being and in helping to alleviate the hardships of imprisonment. That is not to say men were less concerned about supporting others, as they also sought to prove to their families that they had changed. However, their concerns were more family-oriented, and supporting loved ones usually occurred after their release.

Both men's and women's narratives highlight individual agency. They remained proactive in their resettlement efforts and, where possible, determined the most suitable direction and actions to support their transition into society. Human agency was essential in overcoming the numerous hurdles faced by participants upon release (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). It was also particularly important for men who had been previously incarcerated, as these men generally

had fewer social and financial resources, including access to them. With limited resources, individual agency was vital in helping men and women avoid trouble, such as steering clear of former associates and distancing themselves from situations that might encourage offending. I observed that the men and women acted as autonomous agents even before they had desisted from crime. In other words, they had developed greater self-control and shown they were taking responsible steps to rebuild their lives in preparation for leaving prison.

This study raises important questions about the extent to which individuals should be held accountable and responsible for setting the terms of their sentencing and resettling into the community. Penal institutions, such as open prisons, which are meant to focus on resettlement and rehabilitation, are places where positive change can occur. Feelings such as pain, suffering, inhumanity, degradation, and stigma are most evident within prison walls. The narratives of the men and women in this study suggest that imprisonment does not have to be as it currently is.

Yet, critics argue that ‘desistance-oriented interventions adopted in the criminal justice system are believed to be used as a means further to advance a neoliberal, late modern agenda, with a greater burden of responsibility placed on the shoulders of individuals and independent agencies, rather than the state’ (Kazemian, 2020: 54; see also Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). The responsibilisation discourse, the idea that people should be held accountable for their actions, may impede the desistance process for those leaving prison by shifting responsibility onto the individual, most of whom lack social and economic resources after their release. Graham and McNeill (2017: 445) remind us that desistance is not a criminal justice policy or programme, but rather, ‘a process that belongs to the desisters themselves’.

To facilitate abstinence from crime, we must be attentive to men's and women's complex needs, recognise differences and similarities in desistance trajectories, and understand how people can support rather than be restricted by criminal justice policies and practices. Individual and structural factors are relevant and complexly linked. It is insufficient to focus solely on structural and cognitive perspectives, as these cannot explain the individual differences in the desistance process, which I have demonstrated are also shaped by lived experiences inside and outside prison.

We need a radical change in how we view prisoners if we are ever to move beyond fears of 'dangerous offenders' and recognise them as individuals who can change and lead fulfilling, law-abiding lives like the rest of society. Naturally, those labelled as 'dangerous' are kept in high-security prisons. However, this group makes up a very small fraction of the total prison population. Furthermore, almost all prisoners will eventually be released back into the community, making it especially important and valuable to understand their experiences.

Moreover, it is worthwhile to challenge criminological discourse and criminal justice agencies' preoccupation with 're-words'. As McNeill and Graham (2019: 366) highlight:

'The common arguments are, first, that these words spring from the (philosophically) liberal assumption that there is a just order in which the "offender" was once habilitated, integrated and settled and, secondly, by implication, that the challenge is replacing him or her in that social order, making him or her fit back in'.

Throughout this thesis, I have deliberately avoided using phrases that assume individuals are already integrated into society. For most, this is not true.

I. Imprisonment, Neoliberalism, and Positive Growth

The interviewees demonstrated the potential for individual growth inside prison and how this growth can be sustained on release. There are important parallels here with Kazemian's (2020) qualitative study. Individuals who moved towards a law-abiding life did not just rely on hopeful ambitions about their release; 'they were also ready to take on possible challenges' (ibid: 191). Participants not only underwent a process of change inside prison but were 'well advanced in their reflection about their suffering, the pain that they may have caused others, and the reasons underlying their involvement in crime' (ibid). Self-reflection prompted men and women to scrutinise their pasts so they could develop an understanding of what change was most required. As the need for change was identified, internalised, and processed, it became part of the individual's newfound perspective.

However, it is unreasonable to expect men and women to make excessive efforts and commitments to achieve positive change and reach their full potential. Open prisons can and should support desistance, enabling individuals to realise and pursue their ambitions. They must offer adequate assistance to address resettlement needs and help people find ways to enact their identity transformations. The one-size-fits-all model is flawed. Individualised sentence planning should start early and utilise a strengths-based approach. This forward-looking model should also be integrated into probation supervision for those serving their sentences in the community.

As outlined at the beginning of this thesis, penal policy and practices are heavily intertwined with neoliberal socio-economic policies. The participants' narratives have shown that the neoliberal sentiment remains true. Due to the organisation and delivery of prisoner services and probation practices, which are

partially privatised (see Padfield, 2019), they have paradoxically distanced themselves from the services they seek to offer. For example, while open prisons are supposed to facilitate resettlement and support people's transition into the community, their tendency to rely on community providers and third-party agencies means that the responsibility is transferred from prison and probation services to external organisations. Consequently, this leaves many individuals accountable for achieving their ambitions rather than understanding their complex needs as a product of social, political, and economic structures. Furthermore, part-privatisation of the criminal justice system means that individuals are also transferred to many post-release services that are often disjointed and do not necessarily accommodate their specific needs. This fragmentation of community services has significant implications for individuals with multiple problems that must be addressed in the post-release context if they are to integrate into society and reinstate their lives.

Individual change can, therefore, be understood within the framework of neoliberal-influenced penal politics. The conditions in open settings place the responsibility on individuals to self-rehabilitate and manage their incarceration. The shift away from state regulation of public services restructures the economy, enabling individuals to take accountability for their actions and reinforcing the neoliberal drive towards self-sufficiency within the community. Under neoliberalism, the prison and probation systems are individualised, so responsibility for successes and failures rests with the individual. The penal sphere is marked by neoliberal responsibilisation, where individuals are expected to make rational decisions about activities and programmes that will aid their resettlement. For example, many prisoners decided which aspects of the prisoner regime they

wanted to participate in, while others rejected the banality of precarious work. However, Tony's account also demonstrated that sometimes, people with minimal social and economic resources and no formal education are left with little option but to accept precarious, low-paid labour. Others, like Mohammed, chose to 'go their way' to avoid getting indoctrinated into the system, while women like Jessica and Nina believed they could forge their path based on their lived experiences. What is evident through prisoners' accounts is that the prison and probation system requires individuals to reform themselves, and this motive can be better understood within a broader neoliberal penological context, which characterises the modern prison.

Moreover, as interviewees' narratives demonstrated, the struggles on release, through the restrictions of licence conditions, difficulties of securing housing and the impact of the stigma of the criminal label, leave many people to regain the lives they built before their incarceration. At the same time, a widened web of neoliberal social control practices forms spaces beyond the prison that exacerbate post-release hardships, societal marginality, and integration. While the testimonies in this thesis proved that desistance was possible following a period of incarceration, it is often the case that prisoners transport their struggles into society and back into prison, making it extremely difficult for individuals to break free from cycles of socio-economic marginalisation, poverty, trauma, and abuse.

Segrave and Carlton (2013) have advanced a similar argument regarding women's incarceration. The authors highlight the interconnectedness between the effects of imprisonment and post-release experiences, arguing that to understand women's accounts of incarceration fully, we must look at how the impact of lived experiences before imprisonment (including those in early life) influence prison

experiences and how these manifest as part of wider structural disadvantage and poverty, which continue to impact a person's life once they are released. My thesis highlights how the nexus between penal power and the state transfers from prison to society, illustrating that post-release experiences are closely intertwined with the burdens and pains of imprisonment, which subsequently exacerbate social disadvantage. Elias' account offers a notable example of how the lack of direct probation support intensified his post-release housing struggles, leaving him in a disadvantaged position as when he first entered prison.

Thus, I have sought to explain how structural factors, such as employment and family ties, intersect with individual factors, including identity construction. This often-overlooked interconnectedness is a significant aspect of giving up crime. Desistance can be more accurately understood as a dynamic and non-linear process, shaped by multiple, concurrent transitions that occur both during incarceration and following release as individuals strive to move away from crime and toward societal integration.

Open prisons can be an ideal setting for planting the seeds of change. This is particularly significant amidst a punitive penal climate, combined with understaffing, fiscal constraints, and prison overcrowding, making growth opportunities increasingly difficult to capitalise on. This dissertation demonstrates that prisons can facilitate the development of self-understanding, empathy, and awareness in men and women who previously lacked these qualities. Punitive prisons impede growth, resettlement, and desistance. As Kazemian (2020: 222) states, 'desistance from crime may occur *despite* punishment, and not because of it. The non-punitive dimensions of the prison experience can stimulate positive transformations'. Developing a fully 'non-punitive' prison might not be possible

as deprivation of liberty is punishment (Liebling, 2004). What is essential, however, is that even in open prisons, where people can work and rebuild family ties within the community, there is no need to inflict extra pain, such as enforcing stringent rules, rigid regimes, limited opportunities for meaningful work, and minimum wages. Prisons need an ideological and cultural shift from inflicting pain to providing care.

Women in East Sutton Park had positive experiences and benefited more from their penal regime than the men in Spring Hill. In prison, Rebecca discovered her artistic talents, which she continued to develop at home. Jessica also began her master's degree while incarcerated, even though she was required to complete it after her release. Fiona secured a project management role within the prison, aligning with her previous background and interests. By contrast, the men did not share the experiences and skills they could transfer to the community.

This study illustrates that positive growth can be achieved in prison despite the numerous obstacles that individuals experience there and afterwards. My interviews identified standard features among the narratives of those who engage in a path of individual transformation: respondents explored their suffering to minimise the chances of future consequences and adverse outcomes; they took responsibility for their actions and used adversity to grow and heal; they acknowledged the harm they had caused to others and created a barrier between their good self and their harmful past crimes.

However, the prison and probation systems are not designed to promote positive transformation. While I highlighted some of the women's achievements inside prison, most of those I interviewed made it clear: the system makes it difficult for people to thrive. Pursuing what is essential to aid resettlement should

not be a challenging task. This strain causes more harm than good. The prison system, furthermore, perpetuates the inequalities of the outside world. As demonstrated through the jobs the regime allocates, it places individuals at the lower end of the labour market, increasing their chances of becoming minimum wage, zero-hours contract workers.

The prison and probation system greatly restricts the individual. Desistance from crime often seems to require an unreasonable amount of willpower and motivation, starting in prison, to ease the trauma and pain. It also demands a clear level of determination and mental strength to overcome the challenges and burdens faced by men and women once they leave prison and complete the remainder of their sentence on licence. When positive change and growth happen, it is mainly the result of personal efforts rather than penal measures.

II. Contribution and Significance

This study has provided a more substantive and theoretically integrated understanding of desistance. By conceptualising desistance as a process in which people navigate a series of transitional events that co-occur and a conscious effort to move away from crime and toward integration into society, I have highlighted the critical but often overlooked relationship between the individual and society.

The research offers a holistic lens to analyse the broad constellation of factors typically influencing post-release outcomes. It has demonstrated how structural and individual factors, including employment, family ties, and identity construction, are essential for the initiation of successful resettlement and post-release integration (see also Rodermond et al., 2022). The thesis addresses the lack of research on the lived experiences of people transitioning from prison to the

community, the limited critical accounts of resettlement processes, and the continuities and dissonances within men's and women's post-release journeys.

Prison scholars have primarily focused on internal matters that they conceive as exclusive to the prison environment (Crewe, 2020; Crewe et al., 2017; Liebling, 2004; Liebling et al., 2019; Sparks et al., 1996; Sykes, 1958; Wright et al., 2022). A substantial body of research on open prisons is emerging in the United Kingdom (Micklethwaite and Earle, 2021; Mjåland et al., 2021; Statham et al., 2021) and within Nordic countries (Neumann, 2012; Pakes, 2023; Shammas, 2014; Ugelvik and Damsa, 2018). These studies have made notable contributions to the literature by describing how the pains of imprisonment manifest with the exercise of penal power. However, there is still much to learn from examining prisoners' accounts of open conditions in England. Much prison scholarship has analysed various aspects of prison life. Still, research on how these factors connect to post-release outcomes remains integral to further our understanding of desistance as a transitional process shaped by imprisonment.

Following the same group of people into the community to understand their transitional experiences from imprisonment requires a close examination of the obstacles that prisoners are likely to face in post-release integration. For this group of people serving the latter half of their sentence in the community, their resettlement experiences are influenced by the supervision of the Probation Service. Despite the growing body of scholarship on probation supervision, more research is needed on the immediate post-release challenges faced by prisoners on licence. These initial transitions into the community present various difficulties for many individuals leaving prison who aim to rebuild their lives. I have demonstrated that while probation practices and supervision aim to support resettlement, they

also impede the post-release needs of people attempting to integrate into society.

This thesis has furthered our empirical understanding of prison sociology and desistance by utilising a unique set of testimonies from prisoners in open conditions who are released into the community to complete their sentence on licence. Open prisons serve as vital sites for empirical research because they are, in effect, resettlement environments aimed at preparing prisoners for life after imprisonment. A study investigating the experiences of men and women in open conditions broadens knowledge about the impact of incarceration. It helps clarify the various pathways to resettlement, the obstacles faced by men and women, and how they overcome these challenges to avoid reoffending.

While this dissertation attributes much of the significance of positive experiences and trajectories of desistance to individual outcomes, the research findings also address policy concerns regarding how best to promote desistance. Open prisons can facilitate the preparedness of people leaving prison. Focusing on employment opportunities that align with individual aspirations and goals can encourage a form of pre-desistance. As I have shown, greater attention should be given to promoting changes in self-identity, linking these changes to programmes and policies within the prison that encourage social change. The study is also helpful to policymakers and practitioners in understanding what programmes and interventions inside prisons support resettlement needs and which are less beneficial. It explains employment retention and why alternative work is pursued immediately after release. It furthermore sheds light on the interconnecting structural and individual factors that support policy initiatives aimed at reducing criminal behaviour.

This research highlights areas for improvement in supervising men and

women serving their sentences in the community. In line with other critical commentators (King, 2013a; 2013b; Maruna et al., 2004; McNeill, 2016), I have argued that probation practices that promote individual strengths and tangible goals are valuable and necessary to a person's life. This argument is partly in response to framing prison as a tool for 'controlling, containing and further marginalising those at the lower end of the class spectrum' (Hart, 2017: 267). It has been illustrated how criminal justice interventions associated with desistance reinforce a neoliberal agenda (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009), with greater responsibility transferred to individuals and independent agencies rather than the state. The responsibilisation discourse, the idea that people should be held accountable for their actions, places greater demands on aspiring desisters who often contend with multiple barriers that impact their ability to fulfil basic needs (LeBel et al., 2008).

At a time when neoliberal policies have become a foundation of criminal justice practices, I have demonstrated how individuals, despite the significantly challenging encounters and circumstances they face, can make positive changes to rebuild their lives after being released from prison.

Against the rising tide of punitive policies and risk-based interventions, the women and men I interviewed demonstrate that desistance is achievable. This is despite recent crime statistics in England and Wales, which show that just over a third of reoffences occur within the first three months after release from custody and nearly two-thirds within six months of release (Ministry of Justice, 2023b). At a time when recalls to prison are increasing (ibid), this thesis exemplifies how desistance can be attained despite setbacks and when the odds are stacked against the individual. Considering that most reoffending occurs within the first six months after a person's release from prison (Ministry of Justice, 2023b), interviewing

prisoners shortly before their release, immediately after, and eight months post-release allowed me to observe these vital transitional stages. Notably, the study provides a foundation for policymakers and practitioners to understand the key factors that support resettlement and desistance for individuals serving their sentence within the community. It also underscores the limitations of current prison-based interventions and post-release support provided by the Probation Service.

The findings in this dissertation support social welfare interventions for prisoners, similar to those implemented in corporatist and social democratic countries across continental Europe (see Cavadino et al., 2013). In Finland, officials in influential positions have demonstrated that a change in mindset is possible and can lead to positive long-term outcomes (Lappi-Seppala, 2006). For desistance, ‘people seem to change not when we hurt them but when we provide positive support and encouragement and invest in them as fellow human beings’ (Scott, 2013: 100). Therefore, this thesis advocates the need for a ‘critical desistance’ (Hart, 2017), promoting compassion and support rather than responsibility and risk surveillance.

III. Concluding Reflections

The truth is that I do not know what happened to some of the participants after the last interview. However, those with whom I did remain in contact were getting on with their lives and adhering to their licence conditions. At the time of the final interview, all claimed to have abstained from further criminal activity. Men and women had already achieved their goals, and others were working towards them, describing it as the beginning of a new chapter in their lives. It is, therefore, a

plausible assumption that living a law-abiding life and participating in the community for eight months after a period of incarceration indicates that this group of people would sustain their desistance over a more extended period. This observation is particularly salient given that the predominance of reoffending occurs within the first six months following a person's release from prison (Ministry of Justice, 2023b).

After a year and a half of interviews, I walked away from the field and wrote about my participants' experiences rather than immersing myself in them. Given this freedom as a researcher who can gather information and break free from institutional power, I think it is fitting to conclude with some implications and reflections on the future of desistance and prison scholarship.

This thesis began with the premise that exploring the overlooked relationship between people's experiences of incarceration and their post-release outcomes could further develop our understanding of prison scholarship. The central argument that has been advanced conceptualises desistance as a process by which individuals navigate a series of transitional events which co-occur. I have shown how the effects of imprisonment extend into the community and influence outcomes after release. The prison should not be viewed as an isolated institution when considering its long-term impact and the personal change it fosters. The relationship between the individual and society is deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing, functioning in a cyclical process of change. Structural factors, such as employment and family ties, alongside individual factors like identity development, are interconnected elements that continually shape and reshape the desistance process. I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation that prison research and studies on desistance can gain from a more nuanced and

theoretically integrated approach to understanding the different resettlement and desistance pathways of men and women.

We must broaden our conceptualisation of desistance and invest in people's well-being. The prospective dimension of this research has contributed to the limited body of longitudinal accounts of prisoners leaving open conditions. However, we still have much to learn about how people reconstruct their identities and experiences, navigate setbacks, and extract meaning throughout their criminal sentences. This study, therefore, calls for future penal research to be more prospective in developing prisoners' accounts, including their goals and ambitions and what kind of future they wish to pursue, rather than on retrospective events that have occurred in the past. Central to a smooth transition into society and for desistance to become more likely, individual change should be realised and enacted in the future. Prioritising the specific needs and aspirations of the individual in prison and probation practices will enhance the chances of successful resettlement and desistance from crime. In light of these points, this thesis concludes with some final observations.

In line with other critical scholars (Graham and McNeill, 2017; Hart, 2017; King, 2013b; Maruna et al., 2004; McNeill, 2016; Segrave and Carlton, 2013), the concluding call of this thesis is to locate and situate penalty within a regime that places the individual at the centre of resettlement and desistance efforts and promotes compassion and support rather than responsibility and risk surveillance. This is no easy task.

Most often, the open prison is the final step before releasing individuals back into the community, and this period encourages them to reflect on their past and consider the kind of life they want to lead in the future. Providing these

individuals with relevant opportunities, such as meaningful employment, would ease the pains of prison and support their hopes and aspirations for life after incarceration.

The same approach and principles apply to how probation supervision is delivered. Currently, probation is limited in its ability to help men and women overcome specific social, economic, and personal issues. At best, probation facilitates ‘signposting’ to alternative post-release support structures, which are perceived as lacking the direct support individuals require on release. While neoliberal shifts in recent decades have pushed individuals to self-rehabilitate, the Prison and Probation Service must acknowledge that rehabilitation is about helping people and playing a more active role in supporting their resettlement.

Viewing desistance as a series of interrelated transitional events offers a blueprint for enhancing our understanding of the interconnected structural and individual elements that influence a person’s path from prison to society. The link between imprisonment and post-release outcomes helps to clarify the broader network of mutually reinforcing factors. My empirical research demonstrates that structural and individual factors, such as employment, family ties, and identity construction, are essential prerequisites for successful resettlement, post-release integration, and desistance from crime. In this way, prison studies and the field of desistance have a valuable opportunity to collaborate and align their reformist efforts.

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