A Chronopolitics of Desistance:

Shadowing the Resettlement Journeys of 150 Prison-Leavers over 18 Months

Helen Kosc

Department of Sociology

Wolfson College

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Abstract

This thesis examines desistance from crime as temporal work. The study maps the resettlement journeys of 150 men released from HMP Bullingdon, and enrolled in the 'RESTART' Thames Valley pilot, over 18 months. Through sequential interviews, go-along observation, and fieldnotes, the study follows men's post-release journeys from prison to the community, as they attempt to stabilise lives shaped by scarcity, homelessness, addiction, and shifting support systems. The argument is simple: time is governed. Compressed licence periods, conditional housing contracts, and institutional clocks collide with the slow labour of change. The thesis develops a chronopolitical framework of desistance to capture how this misalignment fractures what counts as 'progress'.

Four findings emerge from the data: First, institutional clocks across prison, probation, and housing compress post-release into short, fixed windows—licence milestones, curfews, reviews, and appointment cycles—that dictate pace and sequence, producing a stop–start rhythm that fragments support and continuity. Second, the same scaffold can stabilise or destabilise depending on sequence, tenure, and pace. Third, small, repeatable routines and relationships—often affective and unglamorous act as temporal anchors that hold time together yet remain largely unrecognised. Fourth, evaluation should align with lived time rather than institutional schedules, challenging accelerated 'success' markers that privilege speed and surface compliance over gradual work.

Theoretically and conceptually, the thesis intervenes in wider debates in desistance scholarship by showing how internal and structural mechanisms interact *over time*: the sequencing of intent and opportunity is not a single causal puzzle, but a recurring negotiation shaped by tempo, duration, alignment, and the meanings individuals attach to them. Methodologically, temporal coding, case-level alignment matrices, and mechanism memos render (mis)alignment visible across cases. Substantively, the thesis reframes resettlement as continuous temporal work sustained under scarcity and surveillance. When institutional clocks misread slow labour and misalign with lived change, the challenge is not merely to refine metrics but to rethink the relationship between measurement, meaning, and justice.

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Thesis Overview

The thesis takes a monograph form and is organised into an Introduction (Chapter 0), a Methodology chapter (Chapter 1), five analytical chapters (Chapters 2–6) each tracing one significant stage of the resettlement process, and a Conclusion (Chapter 7).

Each analytical chapter is divided into a Descriptive Section, presenting narrative case studies, vignettes, and observational detail from the field, and a Discussion Section, **w**hich draws these materials into dialogue with theory. This dual structure grounds analysis in empirical accounts of lived realities while also sustaining critical engagement with desistance scholarship and wider sociologies of time.

Chapter 0: Introduction

The introduction presents the study, site and sample, locating the work in England (2022–2024) and within the RESTART Thames Valley pilot. It situates the thesis in the wider resettlement and desistance literature and contemporary policy landscape, sets out the research questions, and develops a chronopolitical framework for studying desistance by drawing on sociological theories of temporality and time; this framework—centred on temporal misalignment, conditional scaffolding, invisible labour and evaluative recognition—structures the chapters that follow

Chapter 1: Methodology

The methodology outlines an ethnographic approach that combines participant observation, sequential interviews, go-along observation and long-term fieldwork. It explains access and gatekeeping, ethical procedures and anonymisation, and reflects on the practical and ethical challenges that arise from a method of closeness and immersion. It then details the analytic strategy—

temporal coding, alignment matrices and mechanism memos—and notes the study's limitations and steps taken to strengthen credibility and dependability.

Chapter 2: Pre-Release

This chapter examines the final weeks before release, following men as they assemble plans, line up accommodation and income, and rehearse disclosures they will need to make at the gate and in early supervision. The descriptive section tracks how goals are negotiated within prison routines and service timetables. The discussion argues that probation's stopwatch and evaluative gaze organise how goals are set, paced and narrated.

Chapter 3: Release

This chapter reconstructs the first 24 hours after release, tracing the movement from the gate to probation and through a cascade of appointments, forms and conditions. The descriptive section shows how small delays—missed transport, queues, office hours—reverberate across the day. The discussion reads release as temporal compression in which scaffolding quickly flips into surveillance, administrative clocks reorder the day, and progress becomes fragile from the outset.

Chapter 4: First Month

This chapter follows the high-risk first month in the community as men juggle housing, income, employment searches, neighbourhood exposure and network pressures. The descriptive section shows the work required to meet curfews, attend appointments and avoid risky contacts while staying solvent and sober. The discussion demonstrates how conditional housing, nightly curfews and short-

term supports demand constant recalibration of timing and disclosure, and how emotional labour holds precarious stability together under pressure.

Chapter 5: The Long Run (2–18 Months)

This chapter tracks those who remain in the community beyond the early months, showing patterns of fragile stability, relapse after setbacks and drift after licence expiry. The descriptive section attends to the routines, relationships and small commitments that help some men keep going, alongside recurring vulnerabilities that unsettle progress. The discussion examines how everyday routines and relationships can steady progress over time, analyses the timing of challenges as supports recede, and shows how internalised success markers often generate uncertainty and loss of direction once supervision ends.

Chapter 6: Desisted, 18 Months

This chapter revisits participants at the end of fieldwork to capture later-stage adaptations, drifting trajectories and shifting definitions of what 'counts' as desisting. The descriptive section follows men who feel they have moved on alongside those who feel stalled or unseen. The discussion interrogates success as a relational judgement, showing how evaluative standards diverge across men, probation and the researcher, and how intent remains fragile and contingent under misaligned temporalities.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The conclusion synthesises the findings and revisits the chronopolitical framework, arguing that desistance should be evaluated in alignment with lived time rather than mere institutional compliance. It locates the contribution within resettlement and desistance scholarship, sets out

implications for probation and policy, reflects on methodological limits, and outlines directions for future research.

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0.1 The Study

0.1.1 The Study: Overview & Aims

This thesis is a study of the temporal politics of release, resettlement and men's attempts to avoid further justice system involvement. It speaks to desistance debates, but not by measuring desistance as an outcome; instead, it traces how efforts to move away from offending are experienced, evaluated, and governed over time. Its central concern is how men leaving prison navigate the fragile and uncertain process of moving away from offending, and how these efforts are shaped by the structures, supports, and constraints they encounter after release. While recidivism statistics record whether someone reoffends, they tell us little about the lived realities of attempting change in the day to day, what supports or undermines it, and how it feels to sustain or abandon efforts at reform under precarious conditions.

The study draws on an ethnographic partnership with the 'RESTART' Thames Valley pilot programme. Between 2022 and 2024, I followed the post-release trajectories of 150 men leaving a local Category B prison, tracing their resettlement journeys across an 18-month period. Through interviews, observations, and engagement with practitioners, the research captures how men sought stability in the face of homelessness, unemployment, addiction, stigma, and fractured institutional support. This dual focus — on men's lived experiences and on the institutional structures around them — allows the thesis to examine how attempts to avoid further justice system involvement are not only an individual project but also a socially and politically structured process.

The aim of the study is threefold. First, it seeks to generate fine-grained accounts of resettlement: to show how men navigate the everyday challenges of housing, work, relationships, and supervision. Second, it aims to interrogate the conditions under which resettlement becomes possible or fragile, paying particular attention to how structural volatility — in housing provision, employment opportunities, or probation support — unsettles attempts at change. Third, the study seeks to extend theoretical understandings of release and desistance by drawing on sociological debates about time

and temporality, exploring how behavioural change is experienced, evaluated, and governed through temporal regimes of supervision, welfare, and everyday life.

At stake in these aims is a broader question about how desistance should be understood. Policy and much academic work continue to frame it in outcome-focused terms — as either achieved or failed, measured against recidivism or employment status. By contrast, this study approaches desistance as a situated, contingent, and uneven process, lived through moments of effort, relapse, persistence, and recalibration. Rather than assuming a linear pathway, it builds a composite picture of desistance as fragile and reversible, grounded in the temporal and emotional textures of post-custodial life and in the chronopolitics of how release and resettlement are organised and judged over time.

The objectives of the thesis are therefore:

- To document how men leaving prison experience resettlement on a day-to-day basis;
- To analyse how supports and constraints interact with men's efforts to change;
- To examine how time and temporality shape the practice and evaluation of release and resettlement, and of attempts to avoid further justice system involvement;
- To contribute a conceptual framework that situates release, resettlement and desistance within the contested politics of time.

This study matters because the conditions under which people attempt resettlement are volatile, often marked by poverty, insecurity, and heightened surveillance. Understanding these attempts as lived practices of release and resettlement, rather than as abstract outcomes, provides a more grounded basis for evaluating criminal justice policy and support. It also draws attention to the ways in which institutions may inadvertently destabilise fragile progress by imposing temporal demands that misalign with lived rhythms of change.

The sections that follow set out the foundations for this inquiry. The next chapter (0.2) reviews literature on release and re-entry, as well as the development of desistance theory, tracing its

internalist, externalist, and interactionist accounts, and identifying their unresolved tensions. The following chapter (0.3) draws from the sociological study of time and temporality, which provides the conceptual resources for the framework advanced in the thesis: a focus on the temporal politics of release, resettlement and desistance (0.4).

0.1.2 Setting the Scene

This study was conducted in England between 2022 and 2024. The participants were leaving HM Prison Bullingdon and attempting resettlement amidst co-occurring national housing and cost-of-living crises, political climates of austerity, and increasingly punitive policies. The men were leaving overcrowded, understaffed, and underfunded prisons and landing in socially, politically, and economically hostile environments.

This study unfolded against the backdrop of poverty, housing scarcity, and escalating penal expansion. These were not just background context but co-creators of experience for participants and researchers, shaping how resettlement was lived and how research was carried out.

Around one in four people in the UK – 14.4 million – were living below the poverty line by 2023, including 4.2 million children (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023). For many, even full-time employment could not guarantee stability: individuals worked multiple jobs yet still relied on food banks, high-interest credit, and energy subsidies to keep the lights on. Rising costs disproportionately affected poorer households, with the lowest-income 10% facing inflation rates several points higher than the richest (ONS, 2024b). Food bank use reached record levels, with nearly three million emergency parcels distributed in 2022–23 (Trussell Trust, 2023). For participants, re-entry from prison meant entering a social fabric under severe economic strain, where even basic needs were difficult to secure.

Housing insecurity was particularly acute: by 2024, only 2.5% of rental properties were affordable to people on housing benefit, while 1.33 million households were on the social housing waiting list

(Crisis, 2025). Ongoing loss of social housing stock deepened this scarcity, with more units demolished or sold than built, leading to a net loss of 650 homes nationwide in 2023–24 (Shelter, 2024).

While welfare provision contracted, the state committed billions to prison expansion, pledging 20,000 new prison places but delivering fewer than 7,000 by 2024, at nearly double the projected £5.2 billion cost (MoJ, 2024; HMIP, 2024). While local councils declared bankruptcy and frontline services buckled under austerity, the government poured billions into expanding the prison estate.

Stigma deepened exclusion. Surveys found that in 2022, 53% of British adults believed prisons "fail to punish effectively" (MoJ, 2022). This stigma also significantly obstructed access to essential services: only 42% of the public reported they would accept ex-prisoners as neighbours, and fewer than 36% said they would rent them a home (ESS, 2022). Ex-prisoners were often denied accommodation and banking access, compounding the barriers to resettlement (Unlock, 2023; PRT, 2022).

The pressures of poverty, housing scarcity, and carceral expansion were mirrored inside the prison and probation system itself. By the early 2020s HMPPS was operating in sustained crisis mode, struggling with overcrowding, staff shortages, and deteriorating safety across both custody and community. In her first lecture as Chief Executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform in 2022, Andrea Coomber warned:

> Our prisons stand in crisis… Rather than invest to solve and address the unmet needs of society, governments of both colours have sought to punish and imprison their way out of a mental health crisis, a drug addiction crisis, and now the beginnings of the cost-of-living crisis.

Between 2021 and 2024, the prison population rose from 78,000 to over 87,000 (MoJ, 2024a). By mid-2024, occupancy had reached 97–99%, with fewer than 100 spare spaces across the estate (Owers, 2025). Emergency measures such as '*Operation Safeguard'* and '*Operation Early Dawn'* — once considered exceptional — became routine. Despite pledges to build 20,000 new prison

places, fewer than 7,000 had materialised by the end of 2024, many of them temporary modular units (NAO, 2023).

Probation services were no less strained. Only 76% of officer posts were filled in 2024, and inspectors reported unmanageable caseloads and poor supervision quality (HMI Probation, 2023). The '*Offender Management in Custody'* model, intended to ensure continuity of care, faltered, with fewer than 60% of prisoners receiving regular keywork sessions (HMI Prisons & HMI Probation, 2023). Many individuals were released without stable accommodation or identification, and in some prisons up to half were discharged into street homelessness (NAO, 2023).

Amid these pressures, safety deteriorated. Recorded self-harm incidents reached an all-time high of 79,027 in 2024, assaults rose to nearly 30,000, and contraband finds increased year on year (MoJ, 2024c; MoJ, 2025a). In this environment, new initiatives such as digital resettlement platforms and multi-agency pilots like RESTART were launched not as radical reforms but as compensatory measures within a system already buckling under pressure.

These were the conditions in which men attempted resettlement: moving from overcrowded and under-resourced prisons into communities marked by poverty, housing scarcity, and stigma. Yet even within these hostile environments, many held onto the hopes of a better future – and it was alongside them, in this landscape, that I conducted my research.

0.2 Studying Desistance

0.2.1 What is Desistance?

When an individual leaves prison, they face a critical juncture: some persist in established patterns of offending, while others begin the gradual and uncertain process of desistance. Broadly defined, desistance refers to the process by which individuals cease or significantly reduce their offending behaviour over time. Unlike recidivism – which measures reoffending as a discrete outcome, such as reconviction – desistance is best understood as a dynamic, heterogeneous, and negotiated process. It is not only about avoiding crime but also about developing new ways of living, reintegrating into the community, and regaining full citizenship (Petersilia, 2003).

Yet even this definition raises a contested question: *when does desistance begin?* Scholars have long debated where persistence ends and desistance starts – whether a single offence after release constitutes 'failure,' or whether periods of non-offending, even if interrupted, should be read as part of the desistance process (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Kazemian, 2007). These definitional ambiguities underscore why desistance is better conceived as a process rather than a fixed outcome, and why linear measures such as reconviction rates often misrepresent the lived complexity of change.

Criminologists have long debated how best to conceptualise this process. Maruna (2001) describes desistance not as a singular achievement but as the 'sustained absence of a certain event'. Foote and Frank (1999) characterise it as a 'perpetual process of arrival,' while Loeber and LeBlanc (1998) emphasise gradualism, often involving reductions in the frequency and severity of offending rather than an immediate cessation. In this sense, desistance is less a clean turning point than an uneven process of transition.

The literature also distinguishes between different levels of desistance. Maruna and Farrall (2004) differentiate primary desistance – any temporary hiatus in criminal activity – from secondary desistance, which involves adopting a new self-identity as a non-offender. Bandura's (1977) distinction between behavioural acquisition and maintenance is useful here: while stopping offending

may be achieved, sustaining that change requires deeper shifts in self-concept and in how that change is supported over time. Building on this, McNeill (2016) also points to a third level, tertiary desistance, to describe the stage at which individual change is validated and sustained through recognition by others – for example, via restored citizenship, social acceptance and the renegotiation of roles.

Empirical studies consistently show that desistance is rarely linear. Glaser (1964) described 'zig-zag' pathways, where lapses and relapses occur even during genuine efforts to desist. At the same time, periods of non-offending may emerge without deliberate intent to change, highlighting the complexity of causal pathways. This reflects the fluidity of identity: those labelled 'offenders' are also workers, partners, and parents (McNeill et al., 2012), and desistance often involves negotiating these overlapping roles.

Crucially, desistance is not simply individual but relational. It depends as much on social integration and recognition as on personal resolve, with Weaver (2015) emphasising the centrality of supportive social bonds and opportunities for participation in sustaining change. Petersilia (2003) highlights the importance of restoring full citizenship, while Maruna (2004) draws attention to the Pygmalion effect – the ways in which positive expectations and recognition from others can enable change through self-fulfilling prophecy. Conversely, persistent stigma and exclusion narrow opportunities and can reproduce cycles of persistence (Sampson & Laub, 1997).

Taken together, these perspectives establish desistance as gradual, dynamic, and relational – an ongoing negotiation of behaviour, identity, and recognition, rather than a clean break or fixed endpoint. This framing provides the conceptual foundation for the present study, which examines how desistance is lived in the everyday and how it unfolds under volatile and structurally constrained conditions.

0.2.2 Desistance Theories in Brief

If desistance is the process through which individuals move away from offending, a central question for criminology and sociology has been *how* and *why* this process occurs. In other words: *why* and *how* do people stop offending? For a long time, it was assumed that the answer to this question was a simple one: individuals simply 'aged out' of crime and that the answer was simply one of age and maturity (Glueck & Glueck, 1940; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). More recent studies however have found that, like the origins of offending behaviour, its cessation is incredibly complex and often misunderstood.

Over the last four decades, desistance scholarship has produced a series of influential frameworks, each offering distinct explanations for how and why behavioural change occurs. What unites them is an attempt to identify the mechanisms of change; what divides them is the relative weight given to internal or external processes. Bersani & Doherty (2018) argue that all theories of desistance can be situated along a continuum depending on whether they give greater priority to subjective or structural mechanisms (Baltes & Nesselroade, 1984; Dannefer, 1984; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Farrall et al., 2014). This debate is a deep-rooted sociological one — often framed in terms of structure versus agency (Farrall et al., 2014), external versus internal (LeBel et al., 2008), or social versus subjective (Kazemian & Maruna, 2009) — having shaped the field's theoretical development. At one end are internalist or subjectivist accounts, which stress motivation, intent, and identity transformation (Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). At the other are externalist or structuralist accounts, which emphasise the role of social bonds, opportunities, and institutional contexts (Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003). Between these poles lie interactionist perspectives, which conceptualise desistance as emerging through the interplay of subjective intent and structural opportunity (Bottoms et al., 2004; Farrall et al., 2014; McNeill, 2006).

The following sections trace these three clusters in turn — internalist, externalist, and interactionist — outlining their conceptual foundations, empirical development, and limitations. Together, they

represent the canonical frameworks of desistance research. The review then turns to the tensions and gaps that cut across them, setting the stage for the analytical lens adopted in this thesis.

i. *Internalist Accounts (Subjectivist)*

Theories on the subjectivist side of the continuum place greatest weight on internal mechanisms—intent, motivation, and identity – in driving behavioural change. These accounts emphasise free will and personal choice, downplaying the probabilistic explanations offered by structuralist theories. From this perspective, the central predictor of whether a person will successfully desist is their self-conscious decision to change, regardless of the constraints or opportunities they face in their environment.

One of the most cited examples is Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) theory of cognitive transformation. At its core, the model proposes that desistance begins with a 'crystallisation of discontent', a growing dissatisfaction with one's life of crime that eventually produces openness to change. They describe a four-stage process: first, developing receptiveness to change (often triggered by failure, exhaustion, or crisis); second, imagining a replacement self that contrasts with the offending past; third, reconceiving crime as inconsistent with this new identity; and finally, acting on opportunities that allow this identity to be enacted and reinforced. The attraction of the model lies in its intuitive sequencing: motivation precedes opportunity. An individual must 'want' to change before they can take advantage of the resources available to them. Its resonance with 'readiness to change' models in psychology (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1986) has extended its reach across disciplines, and its simplicity has appealed to policymakers keen to target interventions at those who have already decided to desist.

Maruna's (2001) narrative identity framework offers a different but complementary subjectivist account. Based on interviews with men and women in Liverpool, Maruna argued that desisters construct 'redemption scripts' that allow them to reinterpret their past and imagine a prosocial future. These narratives often diminish personal agency in relation to past offending—attributing blame to

circumstances or external forces—while maximising agency in relation to the future. Narrative work, in this view, is not a by-product of change but a central mechanism through which desistance is created and sustained. In contrast, persisters in Maruna's study often adopted 'condemnation scripts,' viewing themselves as victims of fate or labelling, with little sense of agency to change their trajectory.

Further internalist perspectives locate desistance in emotional or cognitive maturation. Giordano and colleagues (2007), for example, highlight the increasing ability to regulate emotions as people age, suggesting that maturity—not merely life events such as marriage or employment—diminishes the appeal of crime. Rational choice theorists likewise frame desistance as a 'criminal calculus' (Shover, 1996), in which individuals weigh costs and benefits and, with age or experience, decide that offending no longer pays. Even here, decision-making is not purely rational: cognitive psychology reminds us that choices are shaped by bias, error, and traits such as sensation-seeking (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Farrington et al., 2006).

Across these accounts, the emphasis is on motivation, will, and self-narratives. Empirical research has shown that many desisters themselves attribute change to internal mechanisms: identity shifts (Burnett, 1992), post-traumatic re-evaluations (Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986), or feelings of shame (Leibrich, 1993). Yet attributing change to internal factors does not mean they are sufficient. Studies have consistently found that desire, self-belief, or future orientation are rarely enough to distinguish persisters from desisters (Healy & O'Donnell, 2008; Liem, 2016; Soyer, 2016). Even theorists closely associated with internalist models acknowledge this in their later work. While Maruna (2001) and Giordano et al. (2002) are often read as emphasising subjective transformation, both have subsequently stressed that such change is always embedded in, and dependent on, structural contexts (see Maruna, 2010; 2016; Giordano, 2022).

The limitations of internalist accounts have been widely discussed. By positioning intent or identity transformation as necessary preconditions, they risk overstating the role of will and underplaying

circumstances where external factors or chance events catalyse change (Healy, 2014; Vaughan, 2007). They also tend to assume that people have the narrative coherence and stability to 're-script' their lives, an assumption challenged in contexts of poverty, addiction, or trauma (Moloney et al., 2009). Finally, by foregrounding internal resolve, they risk obscuring the extent to which opportunities and constraints are structurally distributed, and how subjective change is often embedded in material conditions (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001).

ii. *Externalist Accounts (Structuralist)*

On the opposite end of the continuum from internalist accounts are structuralist theories, which emphasise the determining force of social context, institutions, and cultural milieu. Here, behaviour is explained less through individual choice than through the opportunities and constraints generated by one's environment. Desistance is therefore enabled or disabled by factors such as employment, housing, finances, neighbourhood, and social networks. These approaches highlight how trajectories are redirected by situational inducements, institutional attachments, or separation from criminogenic contexts.

The most influential contribution in this tradition is Sampson and Laub's 'age-graded' theory of informal social control (1993; 2003). Drawing on longitudinal data from the Glueck study and later follow-ups, they argued that adult social bonds such as marriage, stable employment, and military service act as "turning points" that can redirect trajectories. These events restructure routine activities, impose new forms of supervision, and re-anchor individuals into conformity. Critically, Sampson and Laub rejected the internalist claim that change requires prior cognitive or identity transformation, suggesting instead that behavioural change often flows from structural inducements. Life events, in this account, provide situationally induced stakes in conformity, whether or not the individual consciously 'chooses' to desist.

A central insight of this model is its attention to turning points as age-graded: certain bonds and transitions carry particular weight at particular life stages. This has made the framework foundational

for life-course criminology, inspiring studies on the protective role of work, marriage, and military service (Warr, 1998; Laub & Sampson, 2001). Yet the model has been widely critiqued. First, it reflects mid-20th century American conditions, where stable industrial work and normative marriage were far more accessible. In contemporary contexts marked by precarious labour markets, declining marriage rates, and punitive welfare regimes, these turning points are often less available, less durable, and less protective (Farrall et al., 2011; Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Savolainen, 2009). Second, by focusing on discrete 'events', the theory risks obscuring the gradual, uneven accumulation of smaller adaptations that can underpin desistance. Later refinements, such as cumulative continuity (Sampson & Laub, 2005) or gradual role investment (Uggen, 2000), acknowledge this but do not fully resolve it. Finally, the model privileges conventional institutions, risking neglect of alternative sources of meaning and stability such as voluntary work, community networks, or faith-based engagement (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004).

Other studies in the structuralist tradition highlight the role of neighbourhood and cultural context. Kirk's (2012) quasi-experimental study following Hurricane Katrina found that displaced ex-prisoners were significantly less likely to reoffend than those who returned to their pre-prison neighbourhoods, demonstrating the causal weight of context. Doherty and Bersani (2016) similarly link disadvantaged neighbourhoods with difficulty desisting, while Calverley (2012) emphasises the role of cultural milieu in shaping trajectories.

The structural emphasis is supported by a large body of evidence linking separation from criminogenic influences—peers, environments, addictions—to reduced reoffending (Kazemian & Maruna, 2009; Laub et al., 2018; Nguyen & Loughran, 2018; Rocque, 2017; Siennick & Osgood, 2008). LeBel et al. (2008), analysing reconviction rates over 10 years for repeat offenders, showed that risks associated with housing, employment, finances, relationships, and substance use were all strongly correlated with persistence, while subjective mechanisms mattered mainly insofar as they were mediated through structural conditions.

Despite their contributions, externalist theories likewise face important criticisms. Many draw on mid-20th-century contexts in which stable employment, conventional marriage, and accessible housing were more widely available, raising questions about their applicability in contemporary settings of precarity (Farrall et al., 2011; Apel & Sweeten, 2010). They also tend to cast turning points as discrete, one-off events that redirect trajectories, underplaying the ways in which change often involves gradual adaptation, sustained effort, and cumulative role investment (Uggen, 2000; Sampson & Laub, 2005). Moreover, they tend to assume that opportunities are stable and available once acquired, underplaying the precariousness of contemporary housing and employment markets, the coercive conditions often attached to welfare and licence compliance, and the surveillance embedded in 'supportive' structures. They also risk treating turning points as discrete, one-off events rather than processes of gradual role adaptation and cumulative continuity (Uggen, 2000; Sampson & Laub, 2005). In privileging conventional institutions, they can marginalise alternative sources of stability – voluntary work, community networks, or faith engagement (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004). And while later refinements acknowledge human agency, externalist accounts have been criticised for under-theorising the active work individuals must do to capitalise on structural opportunities and take advantage of turning points (Giordano et al., 2002).

iii. *Interactionist Accounts – Relational and Situated Mechanisms of Change*

While subjectivist accounts privilege intent and identity, and structuralist accounts stress opportunity and context, a third strand of scholarship has sought to move beyond this binary. Interactionist theories conceptualise desistance as the outcome of dynamic interplay between subjective commitments and structural conditions. Agency is not abandoned but is understood as situated, relational, and co-produced within social, material, and political contexts (Bottoms et al., 2004; McNeill, 2006; Farrall et al., 2014). In this framing, desistance is neither purely a matter of will nor purely a product of circumstance, but an emergent property of their interaction. Bottoms and colleagues (2004) were among the first to propose a 'full interactive framework' that integrated background characteristics, social context, and individual intent. Farrall and colleagues (2014:120)

similarly argued for theoretical triangulation: drawing from both subjectivist and structuralist insights to capture the contingencies of change.

Qualitative longitudinal research has been especially important in advancing this perspective. Farrall and Calverley's (2006) repeated interviews with probationers showed that intent alone was rarely enough: progress often faltered when housing collapsed, work was lost, or debts accumulated. Conversely, access to stability at the right moment could enable emerging motivation to consolidate. Here, structural disadvantage is not simply a backdrop but an active force shaping trajectories, sometimes constraining and sometimes enabling change. Their analysis highlights the importance of temporal alignment: the same resource can be decisive if provided at the right moment, or ineffectual if mistimed.

Giordano and colleagues (2002) extend this through the metaphor of 'scaffolding'. Borrowed from educational theory, scaffolding refers to the provisional supports that hold fragile change in place while motivation consolidates—whether practical (housing, benefits), relational (mentoring, prosocial peers), or institutional (probation supervision). Crucially, scaffolding is temporary. If withdrawn too soon, change may collapse, especially under volatile structural conditions. This insight, developed by Weaver (2015) through her application of Donati's (2011) concept of 'relational goods' to desistance, directs attention to the uneven distribution of such goods and of social capital, reminding us that desistance depends as much on available supports as on individual resolve.

At the micro-level, Bottoms and Shapland (2011) emphasise the situational dynamics of everyday decision-making. Their work shows that the choice to desist is not a single turning point but a continuous series of situationally contingent acts of self-regulation, shaped by opportunity structures, peer presence, and emotional state. This perspective underlines the fragility of change in environments saturated with risk and temptation, and resists the linear sequencing assumed in more deterministic models.

Different scholars have emphasised different weights within this interactive frame. Sampson and Laub (2003) acknowledged agency but argued it is always 'situated' within structural constraints. Maruna and Roy (2007) suggested that structural opportunities may spark early desistance, but long-term maintenance requires identity change. Giordano et al. (2002, 2007) similarly stress that cognitive and emotional transformations are themselves contingent on structural conditions, such as prosocial friendships. These accounts capture what LeBel et al. (2008) call the 'chicken and egg' dilemma: does motivation precede opportunity, or does opportunity generate motivation? Research further underscores that intent is frequently thwarted by structural impediments. Burnett (2004) found that even sincere motivation was often derailed by addiction and debt. Harris (2011) similarly concluded that structural barriers, rather than lack of will, most often explain continued offending. Together these findings reinforce that subjective change, while necessary, is rarely sufficient without corresponding support.

While earlier models tend to imply linear pathways of reform, in which discrete events or decisions redirect trajectories in durable ways, longitudinal and qualitative research shows that progress is rarely straightforward or linear. It is instead often unstable, recursive, and marked by lapses or reversals (Burnett, 2004; Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Interactionist theorists have gone further than internalist or externalist accounts in recognising this zig-zag pattern. McNeill (2006) and Farrall et al. (2014), for instance, emphasise the recursive nature of desistance, noting that apparent relapses can be folded into longer-term processes of adaptation and learning.

Interactionist frameworks have broadened the lens by treating desistance as co-produced by agency and structure, but they are not without limits. Scholars often differ on the weight they give to each side, leaving the field with what LeBel et al. (2008) call the 'chicken and egg' problem: whether motivation generates opportunity or opportunity generates motivation. While these models recognise the importance of contingency and alignment, critics note that even strong intent can be thwarted by addiction, debt, or unstable housing (Burnett, 2004; Harris, 2011). Others caution that interactionist

accounts, while more relational, can still drift back toward familiar binaries of 'self versus structure', without fully capturing the recursive and uneven nature of lived desistance (Farrall et al., 2014).

Importantly, however, interactionist accounts mark a decisive broadening of the analytical frame. They reorient the field away from individualism and towards a relational-structural account in which change is co-produced by people and their environments. This shift destabilises the assumption that success must take conventional forms – such as employment or marriage – and recognises plural pathways sustained through alternative sources of belonging and meaning.

0.2.3 Release, Re-entry & Resettlement

Across these debates, desistance has most often been operationalised as a behavioural outcome, inferred from the absence of reconviction over a specified follow-up period. Even where it is conceptualised processually, it tends to focus on trajectories of change in offending and identity over time. Release, resettlement and re-entry, by contrast, refer to the wider set of social, material and institutional processes that unfold after custody: finding somewhere to live, securing income, reconnecting (or failing to reconnect) with family, complying with licence conditions, and managing the ongoing reach of penal power in everyday life. The concepts are related but not equivalent. Desistance, in this processual sense, traces how involvement in crime may diminish or be reworked; resettlement encompasses an even broader range of post-prison practices and conditions, including forms of struggle and survival that may not resemble active behavioural change at all.

Much of early re-entry scholarship came from the United States, framing prisoner re-entry as a policy and practice field in its own right (Travis, 2005; Petersilia, 2003). This literature emphasised the structural obstacles facing people leaving custody – fragmented support, unstable housing and precarious labour markets – and the limitations of a narrow focus on recidivism as the primary indicator of "what works" in re-entry (Petersilia, 2003, 2004; Travis, 2005; Visher and Travis, 2003). From this perspective, resettlement is conceived less as a moment of transition and more as an

ongoing negotiation with welfare systems, employers, landlords and criminal justice agencies (Visher and Travis, 2003; Morenoff and Harding, 2014). The emphasis falls on the institutional architecture into which people return, and on how this shapes their prospects for stability, rather than on individual decision-making alone (Travis, 2005; Morenoff and Harding, 2014).

A growing body of work in sociology and critical criminology has therefore foregrounded release and resettlement themselves as primary objects of inquiry. Reuben Miller's *Halfway Home* (2021), Bruce Western's *Homeward* (2018) and John Halushka's *Getting the Runaround* (2023) build on and deepen this perspective by taking the post-custodial lives of men and women as their starting point, using ethnographic and longitudinal methods to follow people across their resettlement journeys. Miller (2021) shows how families and neighbourhoods absorb the ongoing burdens of criminal justice contact, as relatives provide housing, money and care while also bearing the stigma and strain associated with supervision. Western (2018) foregrounds the intersection of re-entry with labour market exclusion, poor health and racialised inequality, demonstrating how these factors limit the scope for secure employment or meaningful recovery. Halushka (2023) details the "runaround" of appointments, conditions and bureaucratic demands that structure men's days after prison, highlighting how compliance with multiple agencies competes with, and often undermines, efforts to work, care and sustain relationships. Durnescu's (2019) discussion of the "pains of re-entry" similarly shifts attention from recidivism metrics to the everyday burdens of returning to the community under conditional freedom, including uncertainty about income, housing, social ties and the future. Taken together, this literature suggests that what researchers often capture empirically are not neat trajectories of 'desistance' or 'persistence', but the messier realities of release and resettlement: cycling through precarious housing, insecure work, welfare arrangements and conditional liberty. What is later coded as 'success' or 'failure' emerges from material and institutional conditions of post-prison life that may better be described as survival under constraint.

This thesis is situated at the intersection of these strands. It speaks to desistance theory, but it is not primarily a study of desistance. Rather, it is a study of the social, temporal and institutional

organisation of release and resettlement and of men's attempts to avoid further justice system involvement. Empirically, it follows release and resettlement as they unfold through unstable housing, precarious work, shifting social ties and the demands of supervision. The analytic focus is on men's attempts to stabilise their lives after prison, and on how these attempts are enabled or undermined by the institutional and temporal organisation of re-entry.

In this sense, the chapters that follow extend desistance debates by embedding them in discussions of release, re-entry and the sociology of time. They show how familiar desistance themes – agency, identity change, social bonds – are refracted through the temporal organisation of release: through recall windows, appointment schedules, benefit delays and the fragile rhythms of day-to-day survival. Rather than treating resettlement as a backdrop to desistance, the thesis treats resettlement itself as a central object of analysis, and desistance as one of several overlapping ways in which men, practitioners and institutions measure men's progress after release. The next section turns to the remaining gaps and tensions in desistance research that this resettlement-focused approach brings into view.

0.2.4 Gaps & Tensions

Despite the considerable development of desistance scholarship over the past four decades – from individual cognitive transformations, through relational and structural integration, to affective critiques – the field remains marked by a number of unresolved theoretical and empirical tensions. These gaps are not merely academic abstractions: they shape how interventions are designed, how outcomes are measured, and how the lived realities of those leaving prison are understood or misrepresented. For studies that focus empirically on release and resettlement, they also influence whether men's everyday struggles for survival are recognised on their own terms or squeezed into narrow categories of 'success' or 'failure' to desist.

A first enduring tension lies in the overemphasis on agency and under-theorisation of structure. Even as more recent models have integrated structural considerations, there remains a persistent tendency – in both research and policy uptake – to privilege individual motivation, commitment, and "readiness to change" as the primary levers of desistance. Structural conditions are often treated as enabling or constraining factors that operate in the background, rather than as co-constitutive forces that actively shape the very possibility, form, and durability of change. This imbalance risks producing what Farrall et al. (2014) term a 'responsibilising' narrative, in which the burden of reform is placed disproportionately on the individual while systemic and institutional barriers remain underexamined or unchallenged.

The second, related issue is the continued dominance of linear, sequential models of change. The Paternoster and Bushway cognitive transformation model, Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory, and even some interpretations of narrative identity work remain anchored in a logic of progression – from intent to opportunity, from weak to strong social bonds, from 'spoiled' to 'redeemed' identity. While valuable as heuristic devices, such models risk obscuring the fractured, cyclical, and improvisational nature of many real-world desistance trajectories. As McNeill (2006) and Hunter and Farrall (2018) remind us, pathways out of crime can involve oscillations, detours, and reversals that do not neatly fit the imagery of upward curves or turning points.

A third tension emerges in the policy fixation on measurable, outcome-based 'success'. As McNeill (2019) has argued, recidivism-based metrics offer at best a narrow proxy for the complex processes that underpin behavioural change, and at worst a distorting frame that encourages short-term compliance over long-term integration. The privileging of outcomes over processes risks incentivising interventions that are more concerned with demonstrating 'impact' to funders or political stakeholders than with addressing the structural and relational conditions necessary for sustainable desistance.

Finally, there is an enduring mismatch between theoretical advances and empirical methods. Many of the insights from relational, structural, and temporal critiques call for longitudinal, ethnographic, and micro-temporal research designs capable of tracing the interaction between internal states, external conditions, and institutional contexts over time. Yet much empirical work remains cross-sectional, reliant on self-report surveys, or focused on programme evaluation. This methodological gap has the effect of privileging what can be easily measured over what may be most meaningful to those attempting to change.

Taken together, these gaps point to a field in which conceptual sophistication has outpaced empirical and policy translation. The move from individualism to integration, from linearity to complexity, and from static to dynamic framings of desistance has created fertile ground for further research – but it has also sharpened the need for studies that can capture the micro-scale interplay of agency, structure, time, and affect *in situ*. Addressing these tensions requires methodological designs that can hold in view both the immediate, everyday negotiations of change and the broader political-economic structures within which those negotiations unfold. Amid these tensions, one issue remains particularly under-theorised and provides the hinge for this thesis: the role of time in the resettlement process.

0.2.5 Missing Temporal Element

Across internalist, externalist, and interactionist perspectives, desistance is theorised through different mechanisms – united by an attempt to explain how behavioural change occurs; divided by the weight they place on agency versus structure (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Presser, 2009; Farrall et al., 2014). Yet across the continuum, one dimension remains consistently under-theorised: time.

Cognitive shifts, social bonds, or interactional alignments are taken to unfold 'over time', yet temporality itself is rarely theorised in its own right. Internalist accounts assume cognitive or narrative shifts simply accrue with maturity; externalist theories cast desistance as a developmental arc of age-graded bonds; even interactionist perspectives, while attentive to alignment and contingency, stop short of theorising how supervisory rhythms, bureaucratic calendars, or delays actively structure behaviour. Existing frameworks typically invoke maturation, age-graded transitions, or cumulative continuity, but stop short of examining how time is actively structured and politicised in practice (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Horney & Roberts, 2004/2009; Maruna, 2001).

In everyday resettlement, administrative clocks – deadlines, reporting cycles and cascading appointments -- reorder what counts as progress; waiting for housing, benefits or treatment governs pace; and recovery and relapse follow uneven tempos that resist neat sequencing. These temporal dynamics shape the very possibility of change yet remain peripheral in most desistance scholarship.

A small but growing body of work on release and re-entry has begun to foreground temporal and relational dynamics more explicitly. Hints of this complexity appear in longitudinal studies that stress timing and alignment (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Hunter & Farrall, 2018;) and in critiques of accelerated 'success' benchmarks (McNeill, 2006; McNeill & Weaver, 2010; Hunter & Farrall, 2018). The essays collected in *Time and Punishment* highlight how penal interventions organise life through waiting, deadlines and accelerated demands (Carr & Robinson, 2022), while scholars such as Weaver and Schinkel draw attention to how hope, obligation and social recognition are distributed unevenly over time (Weaver, 2015; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Rather than seeing resettlement as a discrete transition, this work conceptualises it as an extended, uncertain process in which people move in and out of employment, relationships and contact with criminal justice agencies. In this literature, however, even these temporal and relational insights remain tangential when not further replicated, consolidated or integrated into broader desistance or re-entry theory.

There is insufficient interrogation of how criminal justice systems subtly reconfigure the temporal horizons of those under supervision, erasing the lived pace of change and imposing expectations of rapid transformation and measurable 'progress' within compressed timescales. In practice, these accelerated benchmarks can privilege visible compliance over the slower, messier work of identity reconstruction or relational repair. Without engaging these dimensions, theory risks reproducing a partial – and at times misleading – picture of what desistance involves. It is this under-theorisation – the temporal dynamics of resettlement and desistance – that this thesis seeks to foreground. To address this, the next section turns to broader sociological accounts of time, temporality, and chronopolitics to consider how these resources might enrich the study of resettlement and desistance.

0.3 The Sociology of Time

0.3 The Sociology of Time

To account for the missing dimension of time in desistance theory, this chapter turns to broader sociological treatments of temporality. Time is not simply a backdrop but a social medium — shaped, contested, and structured through institutions and experience. Drawing from the sociology of time, time–space theory, and political theory of chronopolitics, this section introduces three key registers that inform a time-aware analysis of desistance.

0.3.1 Social Time & Temporal Rhythms

A central insight of sociological research is that time is not a neutral, universal medium but a socially constructed phenomenon. Barbara Adam's *Time and Social Theory* (1990) provides a foundational account, arguing that social life is suffused with multiple, overlapping temporal dimensions — duration, timing, sequence, and orientation toward past, present, and future. She conceptualises these layers as a *'timescapes*': a complex temporal field in which different rhythms, speeds, and expectations coexist. The notion of timescapes disrupts linear models of time and highlights instead the simultaneity of tempos and horizons that shape everyday life.

Eviatar Zerubavel's work on '*social time*' develops this point by showing how collective calendars, schedules, and conventions of sequence underpin social order (Zerubavel, 1981). What appears as natural – the week, the working day, the sequencing of education, work, and retirement – is in fact conventional, historically contingent, and institutionally enforced. These temporal structures do more than organise daily life; they create normative expectations about when certain transitions *should* occur and what the 'correct' sequencing should be.

Taken together, Adam and Zerubavel foreground the extent to which temporal frameworks are embedded in institutions and cultures. They challenge the assumption, implicit in much desistance

theory, that change simply happens 'over time'. Instead, change is negotiated within patterned temporal landscapes, where institutional calendars, bureaucratic routines, and cultural norms govern both the pace and the perceived legitimacy of transitions.

For the study of desistance, these insights are significant. Identity shifts, social bonds, or opportunities for reform cannot be disentangled from the temporal structures that frame them. Progress is not only judged by *what* changes, but also by *when* it occurs and at what tempo. The implication is that desistance must be understood as a process mediated by social and institutional rhythms – a struggle over alignment between lived time and imposed time**.** This recognition provides a foundation for turning, in the next section, to scholarship on penal and carceral time, where such dynamics become especially visible.

0.3.2 Acceleration, Present Shrinkage, and Temporal Strain

If Adam and Zerubavel remind us that time is socially constructed, more recent critical theory has stressed that it is also historically variable. Hartmut Rosa's (2013) work on '*social acceleration'* argues that modernity is defined by intensifying temporal pressures, structured through three interrelated processes: the acceleration of technological change, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life itself. These dimensions operate together: as technologies enable faster communication and production, institutions and social relationships are reconfigured more rapidly, which in turn demands individuals adapt at increasing speed.

Complementary frameworks extend this diagnosis of acceleration. Harvey's (1989) concept of '*time–space compression*' captures how processes of globalisation and neoliberal restructuring collapse spatial and temporal horizons, producing a sense that both social life and economic change occur ever faster. Massey (1994) similarly stresses that spatial reorganisation under global capitalism entails new temporalities, with communities destabilised by rapid flows of capital, labour, and

culture. Virilio's (1977/2006) theory of '*dromology*' – the logic of speed – pushes this further, arguing that velocity itself becomes a determinant of power, as the capacity to accelerate defines modern forms of domination and control.

The cumulative effect, Rosa suggests, is the '*shrinking of the present*.' In pre-modern contexts, individuals could rely on a relatively stable present, in which the conditions of life would remain recognisable for a generation or more. Under late modern acceleration, however, the temporal window within which past experience can be projected onto the future becomes progressively narrower. Orientations once taken for granted – stable employment, predictable careers, enduring communities – are destabilised, leaving the present fragmented and precarious. In Harvey's and Virilio's terms, this is experienced as compression *and* speed: the stretching and folding of temporal horizons that make stability elusive.

This account of acceleration is significant for criminology and desistance. First, it provides a vocabulary for situating desistance within broader transformations of temporality under late modernity. If the present is shrinking, individuals attempting to desist do so in contexts where the stability needed to sustain change is harder to secure. Housing contracts, casual employment, and welfare eligibility are experienced not as durable foundations but as temporally constrained footholds – or as time-bound 'scaffolding', to borrow from desistance scholarship (Giordano et al., 2002). The supports celebrated by desistance scholars offer stability but are themselves temporally fragile, vulnerable to expiration or withdrawal. As Rosa's framework reveals, the very resources intended to sustain desistance carry within them the seeds of disruption when their timelines run out.

Second, Rosa's framework helps conceptualise the '*temporal compression*' faced by individuals under supervision. This resonates with Virilio's account of speed as control and Harvey's compression of social life into accelerated cycles. This sentiment is echoed by desistance scholars when detailing the requirement to demonstrate 'progress' within short reporting cycles (McNeill,

2019; Hunter & Farrall, 2018). Such compression is produced not only by penal governance but also by broader cultures of acceleration, in which outcomes must be measurable, visible, and fast.

The implication is that desistance unfolds under heightened temporal strain. The mismatch between the slow, fragile work of rebuilding identity and the accelerated tempo of institutional demands produces dissonance. While Rosa's argument is not directed at criminal justice, the combined insights of acceleration, compression, and dromology illuminate why temporal pressure and compression have become defining features of post-release life. In contexts where stability is already precarious, acceleration magnifies fragility: relapse and disruption are not only behavioural risks but temporal risks, by-products of living within truncated presents and compressed futures.

0.3.3 Penal Time, Waiting, Affective Experience

If late modernity is marked by acceleration and temporal compression, penal institutions generate their own distinctive temporalities. The experience of '*penal time*' has long been recognised in prison studies, where imprisonment is not only a deprivation of liberty but also a radical reorganisation of temporal existence. Prisoners describe '*doing time*' as a condition of monotony, suspension, and enforced waiting (Wahidin, 2006; Jewkes, 2005). Daily life is regulated by rigid schedules that divide the day into routinised units, while longer horizons – release, parole, the end of a sentence – are stretched into distant temporal markers. Time in this sense becomes both stagnant and oppressive: the present is elongated, the future deferred, and agency suspended.

This carceral temporality is not confined to prisons. Community supervision reproduces many of the same dynamics in dispersed form. Reporting schedules, licence conditions, and mandatory programme attendance impose recurrent obligations that punctuate everyday life, often subordinating personal rhythms to bureaucratic calendars (McNeill, 2019). The men and women subject to these regimes frequently encounter long periods of enforced waiting: for housing allocations, benefit

decisions, or access to treatment programmes. McNeill et al. (2022) foreground the temporal dimensions of imprisonment and re-entry, arguing that the 'travails' of penal time – de-synchrony between prison and community time, contested notions of readiness and an enduring sense of temporariness – shape how change is experienced long after release. Their account locates re-entry within a broader timescape of punishment, underlining that efforts to desist unfold within, and are constrained by, these misaligned temporalities. As Auyero (2012) has shown in other institutional contexts, waiting is rarely neutral. It is a technique of governance, a form of symbolic domination that communicates marginality and produces compliant, dependent subjects. In penal contexts, waiting functions as a mechanism of control, reminding individuals that their futures are contingent on bureaucratic processes and institutional permission.

The affective dimensions of penal time are equally significant. Bourdieu (2000) characterised waiting as a form of *'symbolic violence*': to be kept waiting is to be reminded of one's position in a hierarchy, one's lack of power to control the tempo of life. For those under penal supervision, the emotional consequences are profound. Prison time is experienced as boredom, lethargy, and frustration; supervision time as anxiety, uncertainty, and a heightened sense of fragility. The oscillation between stagnation and pressure – endless waiting punctuated by abrupt deadlines or reporting requirements – creates a volatile temporal environment. Individuals must manage not only the external demands of supervision but also the internal strain of living in suspended or compressed time.

These dynamics have direct implications for desistance. The slow, uneven work of rebuilding identity and relationships rarely aligns with the bureaucratic tempo of penal governance. Deadlines to secure housing, find employment, or demonstrate sobriety impose accelerated schedules onto processes that are by nature fragile and recursive. Conversely, long periods of institutional waiting – for housing decisions, treatment places, or parole hearings – can erode motivation, leaving individuals in states of paralysis or despair. In both cases, penal time undermines the very stability it is intended to produce.

Moreover, waiting is not experienced uniformly. For those with precarious resources, the emotional weight of uncertainty is magnified. Housing insecurity, unstable work, and fragile social ties make each delay or deadline more consequential. The temporal volatility of penal systems thus interacts with the precariousness of late modern life, producing what might be coined a '*double burden of time'*: the acceleration of institutional demands alongside the suspension of personal horizons.

In sum, penal institutions do not simply operate in time; they actively restructure it. They generate specific temporal regimes characterised by suspension, waiting, acceleration, and emotional strain. These regimes shape not only how people experience punishment but also how they attempt to desist from crime. Any account of desistance that treats time as a neutral backdrop therefore risks missing a constitutive dimension of post-custodial life.

0.3.4 Temporal Politics and Power

From a sociological perspective, temporal dynamics such as waiting, suspension, and acceleration are not incidental but political. A growing body of scholarship on '*chronopolitics'* has argued that temporal orders are instruments of governance: they organise inequality, distribute power, and shape subjectivities (Foucault, 1977; Bourdieu, 2000; Sharma, 2014; Bear, 2016). To study time sociologically is therefore to study the politics of how futures are opened or foreclosed, how rhythms are imposed, and how compliance is produced through temporal discipline.

Klinke's (2013) *Chronopolitics: A Conceptual Matrix* remains the foundational statement of this approach, positioning temporality as a terrain of political struggle in which states, institutions, and populations compete over the ordering of time. Building on this, Kirtsoglou and Simpson's (2020) edited collection *Chronopolitics and Chronocracy* demonstrates how contemporary institutions do not merely operate in time but actively configure it, establishing temporal hierarchies that privilege certain lives, futures, and rhythms over others. Bear (2016) similarly examines "*chronocracy"* – the

hierarchical ordering of temporal regimes – highlighting how inequality is sustained through the differential allocation of temporal resources. These frameworks shift the analytic gaze from the abstract passage of time to the situated practices of timing, pacing, and sequencing that enable or constrain action.

Sharma (2014), in her influential study of '*waiting as governance*', shows how temporal suspension functions as a political technology. Waiting is not a passive condition but an active means of disciplining populations by producing dependence and uncertainty. In welfare offices, immigration systems, and penal bureaucracies, waiting operates as a subtle but pervasive mode of control, where individuals' futures are conditional on institutional decisions. For those leaving prison, the endless waiting for housing placements, treatment slots, or licence reviews is not merely an inconvenience but a form of temporal domination that shapes how desistance is attempted and experienced.

These insights resonate with longer traditions in sociology. Bourdieu (2000) described waiting as a form of symbolic violence: subordination is reproduced through temporal suspension. Foucault (1977), though less explicit about time, underscored how disciplinary power operates through temporal routines – timetables, surveillance schedules, and the regulation of daily life. Taken together, these accounts suggest that penal time is not merely lived but imposed: it is a regime through which states exercise authority over the tempo of people's lives.

Taken together, these accounts shift the focus from time as an apolitical backdrop to time as governance. The relevance for desistance scholarship is clear: if temporal regimes shape the possibilities of action, they also shape how change is recognised, valued, or denied. The sociological conceptualization of chronopolitics, therefore, introduces an important consideration for the study of desistance – temporal regimes shaping not only the conditions under which desistance is attempted, but also the standards by which it is evaluated.

0.3.5 Bridging Time into Dialogue with Desistance

The review of sociological approaches to time underscores that temporality is never neutral: it is structured, politicised, and contested. Adam (1990) and Zerubavel (1981) remind us that all social life is ordered through rhythms, calendars, and conventions. Rosa (2013) shows how acceleration compresses the present and destabilises the grounds on which futures can be projected. Bourdieu (2000) and Sharma (2014) reveal how waiting and suspension operate as forms of symbolic domination and political technology. Bear (2016) and Klinke (2013) extend this, theorising chronopolitics as the struggle over temporal regimes themselves.

Taken together, these perspectives provide resources for reconsidering desistance. Existing accounts typically frame time as backdrop: internalist theories as maturation, externalist theories as developmental arcs, and interactionist theories as contingent sequencing. By contrast, the sociology of time insists that temporality is not simply the stage on which desistance unfolds but an active force shaping its conditions. Reporting cycles, licence deadlines, housing contracts, or recovery relapses are not incidental to change but part of the temporal scaffolding within which it is attempted.

Bringing these two literatures into dialogue highlights the need for further development: while desistance research has richly theorised the role of agency, structure, and interaction, it has not systematically engaged with the temporal regimes through which these forces are lived, evaluated, and governed.[1] The chronopolitical lens, then, does not replace existing models but reframes them – situating behavioural change within the contested politics of time.

Behavioural change is lived and evaluated through temporal regimes. The following section (0.4) sets out the central conceptual framework, focusing on the temporal politics of release, resettlement

[1] Important exceptions include McNeill (2006), Farrall & Calverley (2006), and Hunter & Farrall (2018), who have each considered issues of timing, alignment and sequencing in desistance trajectories. However, such work has not placed temporality at the centre of theoretical development in the way that agency and structure have been.

and desistance, and draws selectively on debates about chronopolitics to show that time is not simply background but a constitutive dimension of how post-prison lives are governed and evaluated

0.4 Proposed Framework: *A Chronopolitics of Desistance*

0.4.1 From Agency vs Structure to Time

Desistance scholarship has long been structured around the polarity of agency and structure. Internalist accounts foreground individual will, motivation, or identity transformation; externalist accounts stress the influence of social bonds, opportunities, and institutional inducements. Interactionist theories rightly argue that neither can be understood in isolation: change is co-produced through the interplay of subjective intent and structural circumstance. What these perspectives share, however, is a tendency to treat the interaction itself as temporally flat. Internal change is assumed to 'mature with age'; external opportunities are cast as 'turning points' or transitions; interaction is framed as contingent alignment. Time is the stage upon which interaction is thought to occur but is rarely recognized as the mechanism that structures its possibilities.

The approach advanced here accepts the premise of interaction, but argues that the interaction is itself temporalised. Agency and structure do not meet once and for all; their interaction shifts across rhythms of supervision, waiting, relapse, and recovery. A housing offer that arrives quickly may enable intent to consolidate; the same offer delayed may dissolve fragile motivation. Structural scaffolding that stabilises in the short term may unsettle in the long term if its conditionality expires. Institutional calendars impose compressed reporting cycles and fixed licence periods; bureaucratic waiting produces prolonged suspension; relapse and recovery unfold at uneven tempos. These temporal structures are not incidental but formative: they shape the conditions under which internal and external mechanisms interact, and, therefore, under which change is attempted, sustained, recognized or disqualified.

Equally important is how time is experienced: time is not only imposed structurally but also *lived* and *interpreted* subjectively, with men making sense of its pace, speed, and interruptions. The meaning men assign to time — whether time feels accelerated, suspended, or endlessly repetitive — shapes their motivation and, crucially, how they come to perceive their own trajectories — whether as stalled, precarious, or gathering momentum.

The sequencing of intent and opportunity is therefore not a single causal puzzle, but a recurring negotiation shaped by tempo, duration, and alignment – and by the meanings individuals assign to these temporalities. In this sense, the question is not only *how do agency and structure interact?* but *how does that interaction change over time?* A chronopolitical approach foregrounds how imposed temporalities can both enable and erode desistance, depending on their pacing and alignment with lived change. Desistance, in this framing, is not about striking equilibrium between agency and structure, but about continually balancing them across changing temporalities that can either support or unsettle efforts to change.

0.4.2 Towards a New Framework

This thesis develops a chronopolitical framework of desistance by bringing sociological frameworks of time and temporality into dialogue with desistance studies. The sociology of time – from Adam's timescapes to Rosa's theory of acceleration, Bourdieu's analysis of waiting, and recent accounts of chronopolitics – shows that temporality is not a neutral backdrop but a structuring dimension of social life. Time is organised, politicised, and unevenly distributed, shaping how opportunities are accessed, how futures are imagined, and how progress is evaluated.

Chronopolitics, when used in this thesis, refers to the organisation and contestation of time in social life – how institutions sequence and pace interventions; how people experience, plan, and endure that pacing; and how recognition of 'success' moves across actors at specific timepoints. In this thesis, chronopolitical is not a synonym for temporal: it denotes the power-laden ordering of time (release schedules, licence periods, appointment cadences) and the lived work required to keep or regain hold of that time.

Applying these insights to the study of resettlement, this thesis advances the following framework claim: A chronopolitics of desistance framework reveals how temporal regimes – and people's

understandings of them – shape not only the conditions under which desistance is attempted but also the standards by which it is evaluated. In this way, time itself becomes a medium through which lives are valued, recognised, or disqualified. Over the course of one's resettlement, we witness a growing incongruence between *lived* time and *imposed* time – as lived, supervised, and researched expectations of pace, rhythm and tempo misalign – compounding fragility in an already-fragile process.

Analysis can be organised into four themes that emerge from the data when desistance is foregrounded as a temporal practice:

i. *Time & Fragility*:

Desistance unfolds in dislocated, non-linear time; efforts to change must be kept and re-kept. Longitudinal research shows pathways out of crime are recursive, marked by lapses, reversals and fragile footholds (Burnett, 2004; Farrall & Calverley, 2006; McNeill, 2019). Yet probation and policy operate on compressed calendars shaped by social acceleration and temporal compression: progress must be demonstrated within reporting cycles, licence periods or programme completions. Where *institutional* and *lived* tempos diverge, perceived progress becomes fragile: slow or uneven trajectories are easily misread as failure. What appears as drift or relapse administratively may, in lived time, be part of a longer arc of stabilisation. A chronopolitical lens foregrounds these dislocations, showing how accelerated institutional pacing and a shrinking present collides with the uneven temporality of change. Chapter 3 shows this on the first day of release, where immediate compliance demands meet the practical work of re-establishing routines; Chapter 6 traces longer-run recursions.

ii. *Scaffolding as Time-Bound:*

Stabilising supports are time-bound and conditional; the same scaffolds that offer security can also surveil and unsettle when their sequencing, timing and duration are delayed, short-lived or tightly conditioned. Housing placements, appointments and licence conditions can create early alignment,

but as time limits approach or rules tighten, stability can fray, and risk can be reproduced. The analysis treats conditionality and expiry as temporal features of support, not merely administrative ones, and shows how help can invert into pressure as calendars roll forward. Here we frame these supports as temporal scaffolding within a wider chronocracy (unequal horizons) shaped by waiting as governance. Chapter 5 develops this through an analysis of precarious housing, which traces how conditional housing both scaffolds and constrains through late-arrival, short-duration and withdrawal risk.

iii. *The Slow Work of Change:*

Sustaining change requires continuous, often invisible, emotional and temporal labour. This slower work – systematically under-recognised because of its pace – is a necessary condition for sustaining desistance in the long-run (month 12 onwards or post-license). Men expend significant energy 'holding things together' even when external markers of success — employment, abstinence, stable housing — appear absent. Recognising this emotional labour and the role of temporal anchors (routines, sleep, dependable ties) reframes relapse or persistence: they may signal not a lack of effort but the exhaustion of sustaining change under conditions of scarcity and temporal strain. Chapter 6 foregrounds this dimension, showing how emotional labour and temporal anchors underpin both fragile stability and relapse across the long run.

iv. *Misalignment of Evaluations:*

Probation, researcher and prison-leaver can hold competing expectations about the *pace*, *rhythm* and *tempo* of desistance. For probation, progress is compliance within compressed timelines. For men, it may be the absence of immediate crisis, or the fragile sense of continuity – not collapse, not yet stability. For researchers, sustained engagement makes visible the small footholds of progress that are often invisible to official metrics. These standpoints operate on different benchmarks, such that success in one register can appear as failure in another. When these expectations and subsequent

evaluations misalign, the misrecognition can compound fragility and destabilise desistance. A focus on temporal politics makes this explicit, revealing that what counts as success is not neutral but structured by whose timelines dominate. Chapter 7 explores this evaluative incongruence, showing how system, researcher, and self each recognise desistance differently, and how men make sense of the contradictions under increasingly dromological (speed-centred) evaluations.

These themes recur across chapters as we apply a chronopolitical framework to resettlement and desistance— analysing resettlement as the work of keeping time amid mismatched institutional and lived schedules. This framework does not aim to replace agency-and-structure accounts but to reframe them through time: situating behavioural change within the politics of timing, duration and recognition – who owns time, and how it is perceived. In the following section (0.4.3), I set out the concepts that derive from this chronopolitical framework, defining each clearly, and outlining how each is used analytically across the thesis.

0.4.3 Temporal politics of Resettlement & Desistance: Concept Index

Applying the sociology of time to release, resettlement and desistance yields a set of analytical concepts; this section maps their use across the thesis and signposts where each concept does analytical work. This index is organised in alphabetical order, with brief definitions, key sources, and cross-references to the chapters where each concept does substantive analytical work.

Chronocracy

Definition: Hierarchical ordering of temporal regimes that grants unequal horizons, slack and grace periods.

Key sources: Bear (2016); Kirtsoglou & Simpson (ed.) (2020).

Appears in: Chapter 5; Chapter 7.

Chronopolitics

Definition: Temporal orders as instruments of governance and terrains of struggle over pace, sequence and horizons.

Key sources: Klinke (2013); Kirtsoglou & Simpson (ed.) (2020).

Appears in: Chapter 3; Chapter 7.

Chronopolitics of desistance

Definition: The thesis-wide frame – lived tempos, institutional evaluation and researcher timelines drift apart over time.

Key source: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 6, Chapter 7 (with threads across Chapters 2–5).

Double burden of time

Definition: Coexistence of accelerated institutional demands and suspended personal horizons.

Key source: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 4; Chapter 5; Chapter 6.

Dromology

Definition: The politics/logic of speed—power enacted through velocity and acceleration.

Key source: Virilio (1977/2006).

Appears in: Chapter 4; Chapter 7.

Empty time

Definition: Unstructured stretches of waiting or inactivity that thin horizons and invite risk or rumination.

Key sources: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 4; Chapter 5.

Markers of success under acceleration

Definition: Quick, visible benchmarks that fit accelerated policy tempos but turn brittle as timelines lapse.

Key source: McNeill & Weaver, 2010; Hunter & Farrall, 2018; Rosa, 2013; Griffiths, 2014).

Appears in: Chapter 5 (Section 5.2.4).

Open vs Owned time

Definition: Open time is externally unstructured availability; owned time is protected, self-directed blocks that support desistance routines; Converting open time to owned time as the practice of temporal autonomy.

Key sources: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 5; Chapter 6.

Penal time

Definition: Carceral and supervisory temporalities of suspension, routine and elongated horizons.

Key sources: Jewkes (2005); Wahidin (2006).

Appears in: Chapter 3; Chapter 4; Chapter 5.

Shrinking of the present

Definition: Narrowing window within which past experience can reliably project onto the future.

Key source: Rosa (2013).

Appears in: Chapter 4; Chapter 7.

Social acceleration

Definition: Systemic speeding-up of social processes that compresses decision windows and evaluation cycles.

Key source: Rosa (2013).

Appears in: Chapter 3; Chapter 7.

Temporal anchors

Definition: Routines and relationships that lengthen horizons and buffer shocks, reducing temporal strain.

Key source: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 6 (Section 6.2.1).

Temporal autonomy

Definition: Capacity to protect and direct one's time (planning, pacing, sequencing) against external claims.

Key sources: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 5; Chapter 6.

Temporal compression

Definition: The lived squeeze of stacked, non-negotiable demands into narrow horizons (distinct from Harvey's macro idea).

Key source: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 3; Chapter 4; Chapter 6; Chapter 7.

Temporal discipline

Definition: Compliance produced through timetables, pacing and audit cycles.

Key source: Foucault (1977).

Appears in: Chapter 3; Chapter 4; Chapter 5.

Temporal drift

Definition: Gradual misalignment between personal tempos, institutional clocks and research timelines.

Key source: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 6; Chapter 7.

Temporal scaffolding

Definition: Time-bound supports that stabilise for a while and then expire, sometimes inverting into pressure.

Key source: This thesis.

Appears in: Chapter 5; Chapter 6.

Waiting as governance

Definition: Waiting as a political technology that produces dependence and uncertainty.

Key source: Sharma (2014).

Appears in: Chapter 3; Chapter 4; Chapter 5; Chapter 6; Chapter 7.

1 Methodology

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1. Methodology

This thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2024 with prison-leavers in the Thames Valley region, in the context of the "RESTART" pilot programme. The study followed men from the weeks before release through early supervision and, where possible, up to 18 months in the community. Data comprises longitudinal observations in probation offices, Approved Premises, supported housing and community sites; sequential interviews conducted with all 150 participants; contemporaneous fieldnotes (over 250 hours); and associated documents and meeting records.

Analytically, the study adopts an abductive strategy, iterating between data and theory to develop a chronopolitical framework of desistance. Time is conceptualised as constitutive rather than a backdrop. Accordingly, chronopolitics provides the guiding frame for data collection and analysis. A structured process of temporal coding, case-based alignment matrices, and cross-case comparison makes visible how men experience resettlement temporally, focusing on the fragile, recursive rhythms of lived desistance efforts. The scope of the research is qualitative and local. It does not establish prevalence or causal effects. Its contribution lies in the conceptual illumination of how time, support, and evaluation interact to support or weaken desistance efforts.

The remainder of this chapter sets out the methodological foundations of the study. Section 1.1 outlines the research design and introduces the site and sample. Section 1.2 offers an overview of the types of data collected and analysed for this study. Section 1.3 outlines the analytic framework through which temporal processes were rendered visible. Section 1.4 discusses ethics and positionality, reflecting on how proximity shaped both disclosures and interpretation. Section 1.5 considers the scope and limits of the study.

1.1 Research Design

This section sets out the design of the study by establishing *where* fieldwork was situated and *with whom* it engaged. It introduces the institutional sites that structured participants' trajectories and the sample that anchors the thesis empirically, establishing the foundations for the empirical material that follows.

1.1.1 The Site

There were two institutional settings at the centre of this study: HMP Bullingdon, where participants served their sentences, and the RESTART pilot, which framed their return to the community. Each shaped both participants' experiences of resettlement and the vantage point of this research.

i. *HMP Bullingdon*

Participants in this study were drawn from HMP Bullingdon, a Category B reception and resettlement prison near Bicester in Oxfordshire. It served courts across the Thames Valley and central southern England and was marked by high turnover and short stays. In 2022, the prison held 932 men against an operational capacity of 927 (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2023). Each year around 3,500 men passed through, with roughly 173 released monthly. Three-quarters were on remand or serving sentences of under six months. This constant churn meant little scope for sustained rehabilitation, and meant many men were leaving prison with minimal preparation. Originally opened in 1992, Bullingdon comprised six residential units, including specialist wings for first-night reception, drug recovery, and sexual offences. A third of residents were receiving substance misuse support, nearly 200 had been referred for mental health assessment, and 34% of the population were from minority ethnic backgrounds, with a notable number of foreign nationals.

The 2022 inspection painted a picture of an institution under considerable strain. While safety and respect were rated as 'reasonably good,' purposeful activity, rehabilitation, and release planning were all judged insufficient, with staff shortages identified as the critical barrier (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2023). Men were frequently locked in cells for long periods, and education and work were judged to be inadequate, particularly for those who were vulnerable or on remand. Physical conditions, especially in older house blocks, were described as poor, with overcrowded cells and unsanitary communal facilities. Some areas, such as healthcare and safer custody, functioned reasonably well, but inspectors noted these did so despite rather than because of the wider regime. For this study, Bullingdon's churn and instability shaped the starting point of post-release trajectories. Men were discharged from a prison that offered little in the way of stabilising routines, and this fragility carried directly into the community.

ii. *RESTART Thames Valley*

Alongside Bullingdon, all participants of this study were enrolled in the RESTART Thames Valley pilot (henceforth 'RESTART'), launched in 2022 with £7.1 million from the Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) 'Local Leadership and Integration Fund' as part of its wider Prison Leavers Project. The initiative aimed to unite regional partners in a coordinated response to the challenges of resettlement. The RESTART model employed 10 dedicated Pathway Navigation and Advocacy Workers (PNAWs) – hereafter 'RESTART workers' – drawn from five voluntary sector partners: Aspire Oxfordshire, Browns Community Services, Connection Support, PACT, and Thames Valley Partnership. They worked flexibly across custody and community, offering continuity through gate pick-ups, personalised planning, advocacy, and multi-agency liaison (Oxfordshire County Council, Police & Crime Panel, 2023; Buckinghamshire Council, Police & Crime Panel, 2024).

Initially designed to support 360 individuals (300 men from Bullingdon, 60 women from Bronzefield), delivery soon focused entirely on Bullingdon due to accessibility barriers at Bronzefield. Its target group were those released into Thames Valley with multiple, complex needs.

Oversight was provided by the Thames Valley Reducing Reoffending Executive Board, with senior leaders from HMPPS, the NHS, local authorities, the OPCC, and voluntary sector organisations. A multi-agency 'Learning Hub' supported iterative adjustments and problem-solving (Oxfordshire County Council, Police & Crime Panel, 2023; Buckinghamshire Council, Police & Crime Panel, 2024). RESTART also made use of digital innovation to improve information flow. Through the "Assess, Plan, Track" (APT) platform, service users could co-produce digital resettlement plans accessible across agencies, improving coordination and visibility.

RESTART set out with the intention to act as a 'backbone' within the system, providing coordination, visibility, and relational continuity. In practice, however, it frequently substituted for statutory services when these failed to deliver. As a short-term, resource-constrained initiative, RESTART was as much a product of penal crisis as a solution to it. Whilst RESTART was originally funded for 12 months, at the end of year one it received additional joint funding from the OPCC and National Probation Service to extend delivery for another year. In total, it ran from October 2022 to October 2024, with significant staff turnover over that period.

Finally, this study was not designed to evaluate RESTART. Nevertheless, all participants were enrolled in the pilot, which provided the institutional framework within which resettlement was lived. Its role was therefore inseparable from the narratives of desistance traced in this thesis.

1.1.2 The Sample

This study's sample consists of 150 men released from HM Prison Bullingdon between October 2022 and April 2024, all enrolled in the RESTART Thames Valley pilot programme. The RESTART programme supported close to 400 prison-leavers over its two-year lifespan, from which the participant pool for this study was drawn. I prioritised men released closest to October 2022, to

maximise the period of observation, meaning the study focuses on the earliest 150 consenting enrolments.

Participation was contingent on RESTART's eligibility requirements. To enrol, men had to be over 18, released from Bullingdon, and resettling in the Thames Valley region. They were not eligible if they were subject to Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) or Integrated Offender Management (IOM), which already provided statutory oversight. Enrolment was voluntary rather than mandated, generally attracting men who anticipated significant resettlement challenges.

Participants did not need to remain formally engaged with RESTART to be included in the study. The focus was on post-release trajectories, not programme retention. Men who were recalled or resentenced to custody remained in the cohort, with recall treated as a change of status rather than a reason for removal. Attrition, by contrast, – becoming untraceable to the researcher through relocation, disengagement or the loss of contact details – was treated as data in itself, reflecting the volatility of resettlement. Figure 1 showcases how the cohort shifted across custody and the community, and the attrition rates across the 18 months following release. By the end of the study, 34 men were known to have remained in the community for the full 18 months, 99 had returned to custody at least once during the 18 months, and 17 were no longer traceable through RESTART or probation records. These 17 are treated analytically as an "unknown outcome" group rather than assumed to have failed or succeeded: they may have been recalled, moved out of area, disengaged from services, or sustained desistance without further formal contact. Taken in this sense, attrition is itself part of the empirical story of resettlement, highlighting how mobility, instability and withdrawal from services shaped who could be followed over time and informed the way recall and recidivism rates are presented in later chapters. Taken together, the trajectories mapped in Figure 1 offer a macro-level overview of the trends and patterns that are unpacked in finer, empirical detail in the chapters that follow.

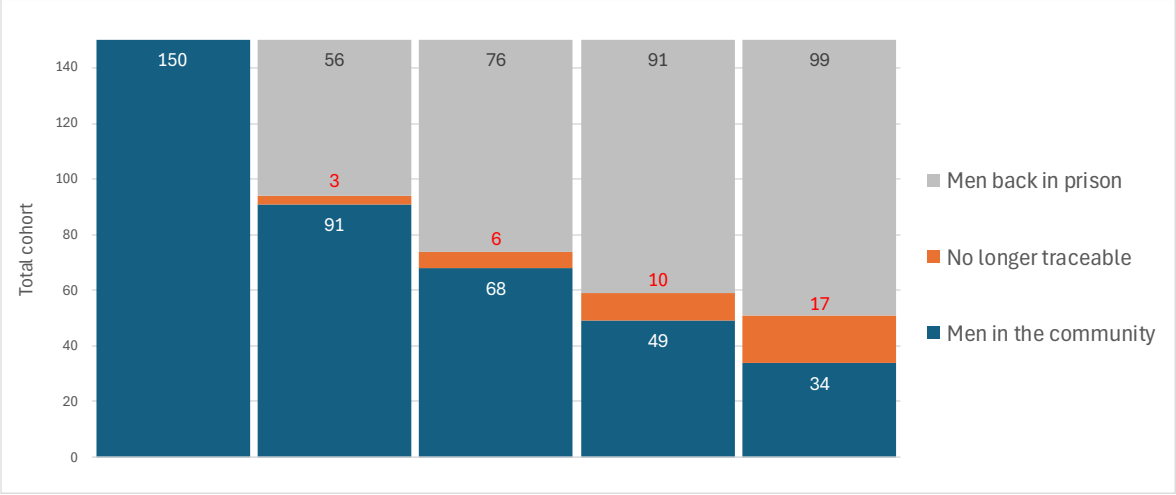

Figure 1. Post-release status of the participant cohort (release–18 months)
Number of men in the community, back in prison (recall or reconviction), or no longer traceable over 5 distinct time periods: release, 1-, 6-, 12- and 18-months post-release.

Contact intensity also varied: often daily in the first days post-release, then weekly or monthly for those still in the community after 6–12 months. These encounters were supplemented by practitioner updates, probation records, and meeting notes, producing a layered picture of men's journeys.

The cohort was geographically spread across Aylesbury, Reading, Slough, Oxford, Milton Keynes, Bicester, and High Wycombe, with Oxford, Milton Keynes, and Aylesbury accounting for the largest share. Ages ranged from 18 to 71, and sentences from 18 days to 12 years. While some were first-time prisoners, 82% had a recorded offending history and 59% had previously served custodial sentences, figures consistent with national repeat custody trends (Public Health Wales, 2018). In offence profile, around two-thirds were serving sentences for non-violent crimes (acquisitive, drug-related, public order), with the remainder convicted of violent offences. No offence category was excluded[2], ensuring the sample reflected the heterogeneity of contemporary prison-leavers while mirroring national custody patterns.

[2] Apart from those offence categories that were subject to MAPPA or IOM, as per RESTART's enrolment criteria.

The cohort had limited ethnic diversity, with just over 30% identifying as from a minority ethnic background. This was broadly consistent with the wider prison population (HMIP, 2022). Recruitment was primarily through RESTART practitioners, with occasional snowball referrals. Histories of repeat custody and cumulative disadvantage were widespread. Two-thirds of participants had served between two and five previous sentences, with a further subset imprisoned more than five times, underscoring the 'revolving door' nature of custody (MoJ, 2023). Figure 2 shows the imprisonment histories of the cohort, highlighting the concentration of men with multiple prior custodial sentences and the relative rarity of first-time prisoners.

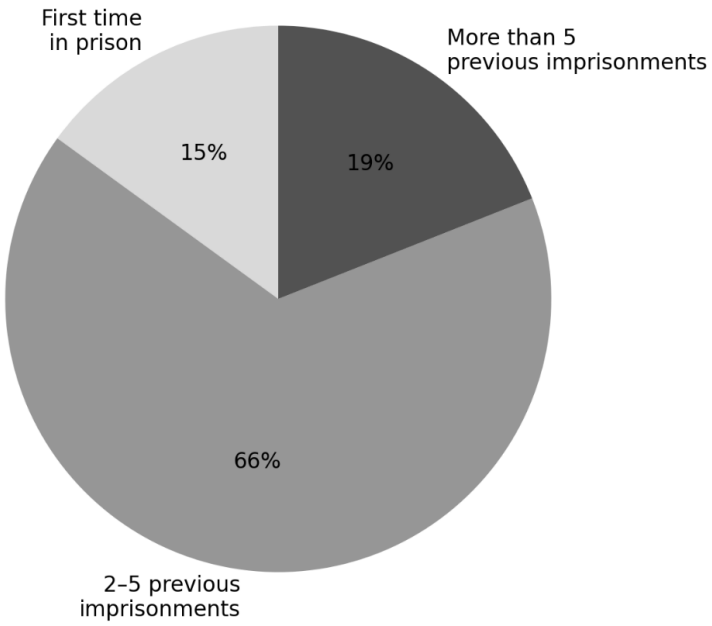

Figure 2. Imprisonment History of the Participant Cohort

Proportion of men in the RESTART sample by previous custodial sentences, per official HMPPS custody records.

Table 1, on the other hand, summarises key socio-demographic and criminogenic features, highlighting elevated rates of school exclusion, homelessness, and drug use compared to national averages. For example, 68% of the sample reported exclusion from school, 41% had experienced

homelessness, and 78% reported illicit drug use. While some proportions mirrored national prison patterns (e.g. care history, dual diagnosis), others indicated heightened precarity in this group.

Table 1: Comparative Socio-Demographic and Criminogenic Characteristics of Participants vs the wider UK Prison Population

Characteristic	RESTART Sample (%)	UK Prison Population (%)	UK Prison Population Source
Excluded from school	68 %	~63 %	Williams, Papadopoulou, & Booth, 2012
Grew up in care	24 %	~24 %	Prison Reform Trust, 2021
Employed at arrest	13 %	~32 %	Hopkins, 2021
Qualifications above A-level	8 %	No available data	———
DSM-5 mental disorder (any)	51 %	>90 %	NICE, 2014
Multiple mental health difficulties	76 %	76 % (dual diagnosis)	NICE, 2024
History of homelessness	41 %	~15 %	Ministry of Justice, 2012
Homeless at arrest	24 %	~13 %	Nacro, 2024
Illicit drug use history	78 %	10–48 % (males)	NICE, 2014
Substance dependence	40 %	30–60 %	NICE, 2014
Supportive friends/family	39 %	No available data	———
Intentionally sought imprisonment	30 %	No available data	———

Notes & Explanatory Footnotes

1. NICE = National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
2. *Employment at arrest* is estimated by subtracting known unemployment rates (68 %) among incoming prisoners, resulting in an approximate employment estimate of 32 % (Hopkins, 2012).
3. *DSM-5 mental disorders* includes all psychiatric conditions, which are known to affect over 90% of the prison population (NICE, 2014).

4. *Multiple mental health diagnoses* (dual diagnosis—mental health plus substance misuse) also affect about 76% of prisoners (NICE, 2014).
5. Where no reliable national estimate exists (e.g., qualifications, social support, self-arrest), comparison cells are left blank or noted.

By definition, the sample diverged from the wider prison-leaver population. Voluntary enrolment meant men had self-identified support needs and some willingness to engage. This likely over-represented those with complex challenges (addiction, homelessness, fractured family ties) while still reflecting the main demographic and criminogenic features of the Bullingdon population. Taken together, the cohort reflects a particularly vulnerable — and in some respects motivated — segment of prison-leavers, embodying wider systemic pressures of repeat custody, overlapping disadvantage, and fragile support that shaped both their resettlement experiences and the data collected.

1.2 Research Data

While Section 1.1 set out the design of the study — its institutional sites and participant cohort — this section turns to the forms of data collected. It introduces the ethnographic strategies through which material was generated and the sources that together form the empirical corpus. The primary modes of data collection – 'go-along' ethnography, participant observation, fieldnotes, and interviews – were designed to intersect with one another, producing cumulative insight rather than standing alone. This approach reflected a commitment to what Geertz (1973) describes as "*thick description*": not merely recording behaviour or words, but embedding them in wider context, relational dynamics, and micro-level detail.

Data collection spanned 18 months, divided between two primary sites: the prison and the community. Time in each setting was structured flexibly to follow participants across contexts, often combining in-prison interviews, release observations, and community follow-ups within the same

day.[3] Access and observation windows were organised around *"temporal discipline"*—timetables, curfews and reporting cycles that structured when interviews and observations were possible. The dataset also included organisational and policy artefacts such as service protocols, meeting minutes, and administrative data. While not systematically coded, these provided context for how practices were framed, regulated, and evaluated.

In addition, I drew on RESTART's internal database containing demographic and administrative details (e.g., offence histories, recall records, licence conditions). While not used for quantitative analysis, these records enabled triangulation — situating individual narratives within broader organisational patterns and highlighting divergences between lived experience and institutional documentation.

In aggregate, the dataset comprised:

• ~400,000 words of fieldnotes

• ~50 recorded interviews;

• Over 600 hand-recorded interviews;

• ~80 informal notes and memos

• Documentary artefacts (policy papers, RESTART reports, meeting minutes)

• RESTART database

This range of material reflects the layered character of ethnographic data: immediate jottings, retrospective reconstructions, and mediated documents. The following subsections detail how each form of data was generated and analysed.

[3] If I had a participant released one morning to Aylesbury, for example, I'd try to squeeze an in-prison interview with another participant that morning beforehand, accompany the release, and then coordinate to meet 1-2 other participants who were local to Aylesbury and in the community.

1.2.1 Ethnography

Ethnography means grounding the researcher in the participants' lived experiences – seeing, touching, smelling, feeling, hearing, and sharing their everyday worlds. This study emphasised proximity: not asking how release felt, but accompanying men as it unfolded; not hearing about appointments second-hand, but observing them in real time.

This study is best understood as a form of "go-along" ethnography (Kusenbach 2003): research conducted while accompanying participants and practitioners through the everyday environments where resettlement and desistance are negotiated. Rather than being confined to stationary interviews or office-based encounters, the ethnography unfolded in motion — in cars driving to and from the prison, on foot during home visits, and in the liminal spaces that connected institutional and community life. Mobility was not incidental to the research but constitutive of it. The journeys themselves became sites of knowledge production, shaping the stories that participants told, the reflections practitioners shared, and the observations I was able to make.

i. *Applying 'mobile' and 'local' methods:*

This study applies both 'mobile' and 'local' methods of data collection. The mobile refers to 'go-along' ethnography, which allows the researcher to move through spaces, places, and environments with participants. The local refers to the micro scale of the study, enabling the researcher to join in the trivial and mundane everyday activities as participants themselves experienced them. Taken together, these methods make it possible to capture what desistance looks like on the ground, *in situ*.

Scholars of mobile ethnography emphasise that movement generates different kinds of data than sitting across from a participant in an office or recording their responses in a static setting (Büscher, Urry & Witchger 2011; Sheller & Urry 2006). As participants move through familiar spaces, conversations take on an organic, narrative quality shaped by the environment. Everyday geographies cue memories, stories, and reflections that might not emerge in a formal interview. Moreover, the act

of travelling together produces an intimacy and informality conducive to disclosure (Carpiano 2009). In practice, many of the richest reflections emerged not in scheduled sit-downs but while walking to probation, smoking outside hostels, or driving through neighbourhoods that men grew up in.

ii. *Cars as ethnographic sites*

Much of my fieldwork was literally conducted in motion. Whether it was a fixed prison regime or the rush to meet responsibilities in the community, men's schedules were quick and unforgiving, meaning data had to be collected 'on-the-go'. Conversations took place in prison corridors during 'main movement', on walks between probation and the job centre, or while driving to a food bank – together, the men and I carved out spaces for sharing, on their own terms.

One such space was the car itself. Cars exemplify the mobile dimension of this study, since they are spaces defined by movement, transitions, and liminality. Yet they also highlight the local, because what was revealed inside them was not lofty reflection but the everyday texture of resettlement: a man slumping wordlessly in the passenger seat before his appointment; another lighting a cigarette and rehearsing what he would say to probation; still another narrating stories about local streets as we drove through them. As Laurier and Philo (2006) note, cars are social worlds in their own right. They structure conversation differently: eye contact is limited, silences are naturalised, and the physical orientation encourages a style of talk that is less confrontational and more reflective. In my case, this sometimes meant the men were voicing frustrations, doubts, or pains that they might not have articulated in a face-to-face interview. Here, the 'mobile' and the 'local' converged: the literal motion of the car provided a backdrop against which mundane rituals (smoking, joking, sighing) became data on how men embodied desistance in everyday life.

A second site of go-along ethnography involved walking with participants through their neighbourhoods or accompanying them back to their accommodation. Walking ethnography (Pink 2008; Kusenbach 2003) embodies both the mobile and local logics of this study: mobile, because the conversation unfolds in movement; local, because it is tied to the immediate micro-geographies that

matter to participants. For instance, as we approached a hostel, one man gestured to the stained carpets and police presence, remarking that "this place just drags you back down." These incidental comments, prompted by the local environment, gave analytical insight into how men understood risk, stigma, and progress. Walking also foregrounded embodied rhythms of desistance: slowing down near dangerous corners, speeding up past familiar faces, hesitating before doorways. These shared moments and gestures generated an ethnographic richness and produced a textured record of desistance in practice.

iii. *Analytic implications*

The data generated through these mobile and local methods required a distinct analytic sensitivity. Because go-along encounters unfolded informally, often without a recorder, they were reconstructed in fieldnotes immediately afterwards rather than transcribed from recordings. This placed them closer to participant observation than to conventional interviews, yet their conversational quality demanded attention to tone, gesture, and spatial context. In analysis, I treated them as situated narratives: products of both mobility (shared journeys) and locality (micro-environments and embodied acts). These mundane and ordinary moments also captured a richness that extended beyond what might be formally captured in interviews or meetings. Triangulated against interviews and documentary records, they provided a granular lens onto how desistance was lived and narrated in motion.

iv. *'Go-along' and the Desistance Process*

Finally, go-along ethnography unexpectedly illuminated what became a central theme of this thesis: the temporal and spatial precariousness of desistance. Mobility and locality were not just methods but became an analytic lens. The quiet of the prison parking lot as men waited for the bus underscored the solitude of the resettlement experience. Walks through neighbourhoods highlighted how past debts or reputations lingered in the local geography. Time spent in hostels revealed how material conditions of ruin and neglect can begin to infect the people who occupy those spaces. Even when

contact shifted to phone calls or messaging apps, the *offline* and *local* contexts remained decisive for interpretation and analysis (Lusthaus and Varese, 2021).

To study resettlement ethnographically was to study lives simultaneously mobile and local — always in motion, yet rooted in the micro-sites of accommodation blocks, probation offices, and street corners. A go-along ethnography, where the researcher could be embedded in the ordinary and everyday practice of desistance was essential to capturing the lived experiences of prison-leavers.

1.2.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation formed the core of this ethnography. For over a year I followed RESTART workers into prisons, community offices, hostels, and the streets, sitting in on meetings, waiting in cars outside appointments, and sharing the long silences of resettlement. At times, my role was that of a shadow: I accompanied staff into spaces I would never have entered alone, and watched men navigate their first hours or days out of custody. At other times, my presence was less invisible. I was introduced to participants, asked questions about myself and my research, and sometimes even invited to share my view in moments of reflection or frustration. In this sense, observation was never passive. What I saw, and what was shown to me, was always inflected by relationships of trust, suspicion, or simple pragmatism.

While interviews and fieldnotes provided important insights, it was by shadowing RESTART workers and observing the support they offered across prisons and community settings, that I gained a textured understanding of post-release resettlement. Participant observation enabled me to witness not only what men said about their struggles, but how those struggles were experienced and negotiated in real time through conversations, encounters, and institutional interactions. As Wacquant (2002) and Crewe (2009) both remind us, carceral ethnography cannot be approached as if one were entering a neutral field site. Prisons are “doubly walled-off by cement and bureaucracy” (Gibson-

Light & Seim, 2020), and the researcher enters these spaces as both an observer and a mediated presence. Observations were thus always shaped by institutional arrangements, gatekeepers, and the complex social relations that unfolded in front of me.

At times, my own presence also altered interactions. Men would glance at me when describing their needs, seemingly testing how their story landed on an external audience. Workers occasionally asked me to clarify questions, explain procedures, or even reassure men. In these moments, I was not a neutral observer but a participant in the encounter. Such moments highlight the impossibility of a purely detached ethnography. Observation in this setting was inevitably participatory, blurring lines between witnessing and intervening.

i. Observation in penal settings

The ethnographic literature consistently describes prison-based participant observation as gruelling (Goodman, 2008; Phillips & Earle, 2010; Reiter, 2014). My experience bore this out. To attend meetings with prison-leavers, I had to pass through multiple layers of security clearance, negotiate with officers, and often sit waiting for long periods while schedules shifted or individuals were not produced from their wings. The inaccessibility of participants and hostility of the environment mirrored, in small ways, the strain felt by participants navigating carceral bureaucracy day after day. While my discomfort was temporary and chosen, it underscored how institutional environments drain energy and shape behaviour. The unpredictability was itself a form of ethnographic data: it highlighted the precarity of access and the degree to which participants' lives were governed by institutional rhythms outside their control. At times, men arrived late, anxious, or already frustrated by the process of being escorted. These moods shaped the very encounters I was able to observe.

Participant observation in this setting was therefore never simply about "being there." It was about witnessing the intersection of institutional logics and personal struggles, seeing how the prison mediated even ostensibly supportive encounters. For example, men frequently raised issues with housing or benefits during their RESTART meetings, but these discussions were rarely just individual

disclosures. They were shaped by the presence of officers, the bureaucratic paperwork on the desk, and my own presence as an outsider. Observing such interactions underscored the inseparability of method and substance: what I learned about post-release needs was always co-produced by the institutional stage on which it was performed.

ii.The vantage point of shadowing

Prison ethnographers often describe the difficulty of getting close enough to understand without being swallowed by the institution (Crewe 2009; Reiter 2014; Goodman 2008). That tension was ever-present here, but compounded by the fact that I was not just studying a prison but a programme designed to operate at its edge. My time inside was limited and always mediated by RESTART staff: I never simply "walked in." I arrived when they arrived, left when they left, and my access to men inside was circumscribed by those relationships. This dependency shaped the data. I saw the prison through the rhythms of resettlement support, not as an omniscient observer. To borrow Clifford and Marcus's (1986) phrasing, the field was not a given site waiting to be discovered but a series of encounters I was allowed to join.

Shadowing RESTART workers also meant that I often encountered participants at moments of acute vulnerability. Sitting in on pre-release planning sessions, I witnessed men present their needs with striking openness. Some described housing insecurity, addiction, or estrangement from family members in ways that felt raw and unfiltered. Yet I was aware that their openness was structured by context. Because they were in a meeting explicitly designed to secure resources, men sometimes exaggerated or dramatized their needs to ensure support. Aaron, for instance, repeatedly emphasized his lack of housing in ways that seemed designed to elicit assistance. My notes reflect both the value of these disclosures – real insight into pressing resettlement challenges – and the methodological caution they required. Observation revealed not only needs, but strategies of self-presentation aimed at negotiating the welfare landscape.

In this sense, shadowing produced data that was both rich and partial. It offered privileged access to men's resettlement as it unfolded, but it also limited my vantage point to the kinds of performances elicited in institutional encounters. Their disclosures, therefore, were framed by the institutional grammar of resettlement support. This echoes Phillips and Earle's (2010) warning that ethnographers must interrogate, rather than uncritically valorize, the intimacy and attachment produced in fieldwork. Participant observation gave me emotional proximity to participants' struggles, but I had to remain reflexive about how institutional mediation shaped what I was permitted to see.

iii. What participant observation revealed

Despite its limitations, participant observation offered unique insights that interviews alone could not. I saw how men presented themselves differently depending on the audience—more assertive with workers, more deferential with officers, sometimes more guarded when I was in the room. I observed the cumulative weight of small institutional frictions: a misplaced form, a delayed escort, a missed appointment. These mundane disruptions often left men deflated, eroding their fragile optimism about resettlement. Without sitting in those rooms, I could not have appreciated the granular ways in which bureaucracy wore down resolve.

Observation also revealed the affective tenor of resettlement work. I watched RESTART workers struggle with limited resources, trying to remain encouraging even as they delivered bad news. I saw men leave meetings with shoulders slumped, or, occasionally, visibly buoyed by a glimmer of support. These embodied moments rarely surface in interview transcripts, yet they were central to understanding the lived experience of re-entry.

Participant observation thus provided a lens onto both the structural and subjective dimensions of resettlement. Structurally, it illuminated how institutions orchestrate the tempo of men's lives, shaping the possibilities of support. Subjectively, it revealed how men managed impressions, sought resources, and navigated the tensions between need and agency. But crucially, it also demonstrated

that method and findings were inseparable. What I was able to learn about desistance was shaped by the spaces I occupied, the encounters I observed, and the roles I was invited or compelled to play.

In this sense, observation was not just a technique but part of the field itself. Ethnography, as Clifford and Marcus (1986) argue, is always mediated. My vantage point was structured by RESTART's organisational logics, prison access procedures, and participants' own strategies of disclosure. The result was not a "transparent" window onto resettlement, but a situated account—partial, contingent, and reflexively acknowledged as such.

1.2.3 Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes were the principal mode through which observation was rendered into data. Across the study, I produced more than 400 typed pages of fieldnotes (approx. 230,000 words). These ranged from rapid jottings in the car park after an interview, to lengthy reconstructed accounts of staff meetings, to reflexive memos in which I recorded emotional responses, analytic hunches, and moments of uncertainty.

As Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) argue, fieldnotes are not neutral transcripts of reality but selective, perspectival, and theory-laden. They capture not only what happened but also how the researcher positions events as meaningful. I deliberately used a dual-mode approach: descriptive writing to document events as closely as possible, and analytic memos to develop early conceptual categories. Fieldnotes served both as a record of what happened and as a site of interpretation in their own right. Because observation is never transparent, fieldnotes inevitably reflect choices: what I noticed, what I missed, how I interpreted tone, gesture, or silences. Far from being neutral transcripts, they are selective inscriptions that transform the fluidity of lived interaction into written traces (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973).

Anthropological debates remind us that ethnographic writing is an act of inscription—capturing fleeting, embodied practices into durable textual form (Geertz, 1973). In RESTART meetings, the atmosphere often carried as much significance as the content: a restless leg shaking, a probation officer's raised eyebrow, the prolonged silence after a client's disclosure. I would jot keywords or half-sentences in situ, then expand them afterwards into full narratives. This staged process highlighted what Emerson et al. (2011) call the double movement of inscription: first, fragmentary notes to hold on to the ephemeral, then interpretive elaboration that already shapes meaning. The delay between event and expansion was both a weakness (risk of loss or distortion) and a strength, allowing reflective distance.

No set of notes can comprehensively capture events. Fieldnotes privilege what seemed salient in the moment and risk occluding what felt unremarkable. The fact that something did not strike me at the time is itself analytically significant: it reveals how my attention was attuned by institutional rhythms, by my own fatigue, or by wider assumptions about what 'matters.' As Sanjek (1990) argues, the ethnographer's recall always involves "remembered events in remembered terms," which foregrounds some dynamics while effacing others. Attending to these absences later – in re-reading notes, in discussion or debrief with RESTART workers, or in light of participants' later accounts – helped me recognise how overlooked moments carried their own structural weight in shaping desistance.

Carceral and quasi-carceral environments complicate inscription. In prisons and probation offices, it was not always possible or appropriate to write extensively in the moment. Longhand note-taking risked signalling surveillance or undermining rapport. As Wacquant (2002) describes in his fieldwork on boxing gyms, ethnographers often resort to strategic memory work – jotting mental anchors, rehearsing sequences internally, or excusing oneself to record fragments in private. My practice echoed this: quick keywords in margins of case files, sticky notes or napkins, then full write-ups immediately afterwards. This underscored the temporal politics of inscription: fieldnotes were always tethered to when and where I could safely transform memory into text.

In line with Emerson et al. (2011), I distinguished between descriptive notes, aimed at capturing speech, gestures, and settings as faithfully as possible, and analytic memos, where I explored hunches, themes, or puzzles. For instance, in one meeting Aaron's repeated "I'm fine" appeared banal in the moment. In later analytic writing, I noted how this phrase functioned as a defensive refrain against institutional scrutiny. Such layering demonstrates how fieldnotes evolve from inscription to interpretive scaffolding, guiding later coding and theorisation. They are not raw data awaiting analysis, but the very medium through which analysis begins.

Writing fieldnotes also foregrounded the ethnographer's body as instrument of knowing (Coffey, 1999). My own affective states—tiredness, irritation at bureaucracy, sympathy with participants—were not distractions to be purged but data in themselves, offering insight into the affective climate of resettlement work. As Kleinman & Copp (1993) argue, emotions register the social significance of events; noting when I felt uneasy or moved provided clues to underlying dynamics of power and vulnerability. Reflexive insertions ("I felt protective here," "I was impatient at this point") became part of the archive, reminding me how knowledge was co-produced through embodied presence.

Recognising fieldnotes as partial counters the assumption that they represent a transparent window onto "what really happened." Instead, they are performative texts that stage the field for later readers, including myself (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Choosing how to narrate an encounter—whether to render dialogue verbatim, to summarise, or to foreground my own reaction—shapes the reality that becomes analytically available. This performativity is not a flaw but a resource: it reminds us that ethnographic truth is crafted, situated, and interpretive. Returning to notes months later, I often noticed my own narrative voice shifting – early entries were terse, bureaucratic, later ones more interpretive and attuned to affect. This temporal drift is itself an artefact of fieldwork, showing how prolonged engagement reshapes the ethnographer's gaze.

Fieldnotes were cross-referenced with interview transcripts, institutional documents, RESTART database, and informal conversations. When participants recounted moments or engagements I had

also witnessed, the juxtaposition highlighted differences between performance for an audience and retrospective narration. For example, a man's outward bravado in a meeting could later be reframed in interview as anxiety or shame. Rather than seeking a single 'true' version, I treated these discrepancies as substantive findings: fieldnotes capture situated performances, interviews capture reflective self-presentation, and the interplay between the two reveals the multifaceted work of identity under supervision.

1.2.4 Interviews

Interviews complemented observation and fieldnotes by rendering participants' own meaning-making visible. Whereas observation revealed the *what*, interviews allowed men to offer their *why*: They created space for men to articulate motives, feelings, or rationales, and sometimes to construct narratives that explained their actions to themselves, to workers, or to me. Interviews include consented, scheduled or opportunistic ethnographic conversations (≥15 minutes) that addressed at least two analytic domains; shorter check-ins are logged as contextual fieldnotes.

I used a semi-structured approach to balance comparability across cases with openness to participants' priorities (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mason, 2018). Guides covered release preparation, housing, income, supervision, relationships, and health, but the order and emphasis flexed to match men's specific resettlement experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Weiss, 1994). Following Holstein & Gubrium (1995), I treated interviews as active encounters: knowledge is produced with respondents, not extracted from them. Talk is shaped by the interactional setting, by the audience, and by the identities both parties bring into the room (Silverman, 2013). In practice this meant attending to how accounts were assembled – qualifications, self-corrections, emphases – not just what was said. It also meant situating conversation within the institutional locations where those conversations occurred (Bosworth et al., 2005): prison interviews would differ from those at the local

Costa. The same applied to temporality, with interviews shaped by the events that immediately preceded or followed them—for example, the hurried tone of a conversation just before a prison mealtime, or the reflective mood of one held after a probation meeting. Treating interviews as contextually contingent, situated performances helped avoid reading them as freestanding testimonies detached from context (Riessman, 2008).

Desistance research shows that people narrate continuity and change to position themselves morally and socially (Maruna, 2001; Farrall et al., 2014). I therefore read interviews as narrative work (Presser, 2009; Riessman, 2008): accounts through which men described effort, relapse, and aspiration, and calibrated whether they 'counted' as progressing. Statements like "I'm still on licence, so it doesn't feel real" were treated as data about categories of evaluation – how institutional statuses and self-images entwined – rather than simple reports of fact. This stance aligns with the view that interviews illuminate sense-making practices under constraint, not just events.

i. *Sequential design and temporal scaffolding*

Because I was interested in a collection of moments – the process – rather than any single moment, I conducted sequential interviews with every participant, often returning to the same men multiple times over the course of their resettlement. This design allowed me to trace change as it unfolded, capturing not only what participants said in one interview but also how their accounts developed, shifted, or were retracted across time. When appropriate, I anchored conversations with a temporal calendar/timeline to locate key events – release, housing moves, job attempts, relapses – relative to each other (Horney et al., 2004; Liem, 2016). The calendar served two functions: (1) it improved recall by externalising memory cues; and (2) it enabled analysis of timing and sequencing (e.g., how housing stability preceded or followed shifts in drug use, motivation, or hope).

Sequential interviewing also surfaced narrative revisions: participants occasionally re-framed earlier claims in light of new experiences, sometimes contradicting themselves or recasting prior interpretations. Rather than treating these shifts as inconsistencies to be smoothed away, I read them

as analytically rich indicators of the fragility and recalibration inherent in desistance processes. The sequential design therefore generated a temporally sensitive ethnography of desistance, showing not just what men thought or felt at one point in time, but how they actively re-authored their own trajectories across encounters.

Methodologically, interviews functioned as triangulation – corroborating, complicating, and sometimes contradicting observation and fieldnotes (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). Apparent discrepancies (e.g., an interview praising support juxtaposed with fieldnotes of palpable frustration) were treated as substantive findings about ambivalence, impression management, or audience effects, not as threats to validity. Analytically, I coded interview material alongside fieldnotes using a hybrid approach: deductive codes derived from the research questions (e.g., "scaffolding," "markers of success," "temporal drift") and inductive codes emerging from language patterns and recurrent metaphors (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Boyatzis, 1998). I also maintained reflexive memos to track interpretive moves, alternative explanations, and negative cases.

I pursued credibility through prolonged engagement across settings, iterative questioning, and the systematic search for disconfirming evidence; dependability through an audit trail (dated memos, versioned code lists, decision logs); and transferability by providing thick contextualisation of settings and constraints (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Where possible, I probed for concrete episodes ("Tell me about the last time your licence conditions affected a job appointment") rather than global evaluations, to anchor claims in lived sequences (Weiss, 1994). I also used "why now?" and counterfactual prompts ("What would have happened if housing hadn't come through?") to elicit causal reasoning without forcing it.

ii. *Power, performance, and my dual role*

Because interviews were sequential, and followed periods of shadowing, rapport was pre-established and increasing. This had advantages (depth, candour) but also posed potential risks: participants could perform in light of what they knew I had observed, or I could drift toward confirmatory

listening, for example. To mitigate this, I deliberately asked for examples that cut against participants' own dominant narratives (e.g., inviting accounts of "bad days" after long stretches of reported progress) and explicitly welcomed dissonance ("It's okay if today's view contradicts last time"). Attending to power asymmetries – age, gender, researcher affiliation – also mattered. I avoided normative "should" language and used pauses and informal language to reduce the pressure to present 'tidy' stories.

While interviews generated invaluable accounts, as a method of data collection they had their limitations. Interviews cannot access experiences participants are unwilling or unable to articulate, meaning social desirability and institutional surveillance, for instance, can narrow the bandwidth of coverage. Constraints on recording in some settings shortened quotable material and shifted the evidentiary balance toward shorter verbatim fragments triangulated with observational notes. These limitations, however, are features of the carceral interface that shape both lives and research.

1.2.5 Documentary & Administrative Data

Alongside interviews, observation, and fieldnotes, the dataset includes organisational and administrative materials that provided context for participants' resettlement. These comprised RESTART service protocols, meeting minutes, and policy documents, as well as records from the digital platforms used by the RESTART workers.

The first was the *Assess, Plan, Track* (APT) platform, through which RESTART workers and participants co-produced digital resettlement plans. These records documented goals and progress across the seven resettlement pathways (housing, employment, finance, health, family, drugs and alcohol, and attitudes). The second was *Meganexus*, a platform where RESTART staff recorded major events such as recalls, reoffending, or disengagement from services.

These documents were not systematically coded in the same way as interviews or fieldnotes, but they functioned as important contextual anchors. They allowed me to situate individual accounts within the broader organisational framing of resettlement, and in some cases to cross-check participants' narratives against administrative records. While I did not conduct quantitative analysis on these materials, they supported triangulation, helped clarify timelines, and offered insight into how support and supervision were institutionally documented.

Together, these documentary and administrative sources broadened the evidentiary base of the study while keeping interviews, observations, and fieldnotes at its core.

1.3 Analytic Framework

The analysis combined abductive reasoning with a structured set of coding and comparison strategies designed to foreground temporality and evaluation. The aim was not to generate a single unified model of resettlement, but to make visible how institutional, personal, and observational perspectives aligned or diverged over time. The process unfolded in five stages. First, I adopted an abductive strategy, moving iteratively between data and theory to refine concepts (1.3.1). Second, I applied a temporal coding scheme to each case, mapping trajectories from pre-release through early supervision and into the 18-month follow-up period (1.3.2). Third, I constructed chronopolitical alignment matrices that set system markers, participants' own accounts, and my observational notes alongside one another at each timepoint (1.3.3). Fourth, I produced mechanism memos to capture how institutional scaffolding produced short-term alignment but often gave way to longer-term drift (1.3.4). Finally, I conducted cross-case comparison to identify the recurring conditions under which evaluations of 'progress' converged or broke apart (1.3.5). This section explains each of these stages in turn.

1.3.1 Abductive Strategy

Analysis was iterative and ongoing throughout the study, not a discrete post-fieldwork stage. From the earliest weeks, I wrote analytic memos to generate provisional categories, refining them as new material was collected. This recursive movement between data and theory reflects an abductive strategy (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012): unexpected observations were not dismissed as anomalies but treated as prompts to revisit and adapt conceptual framing.

In practice, this meant toggling between inductive coding and theoretical engagement. Descriptive categories such as “Family & Friends” or “Positive Use of Time” were initially generated through open coding of fieldnotes and interviews, allowing overlapping categories to emerge inductively (see Figure 2). These categories were then interrogated in light of desistance and carceral ethnography literatures. For instance, what began as a descriptive shorthand – “scaffolding” – evolved through abductive iteration into a conceptual tool for analysing the time-limited and conditional nature of institutional support.

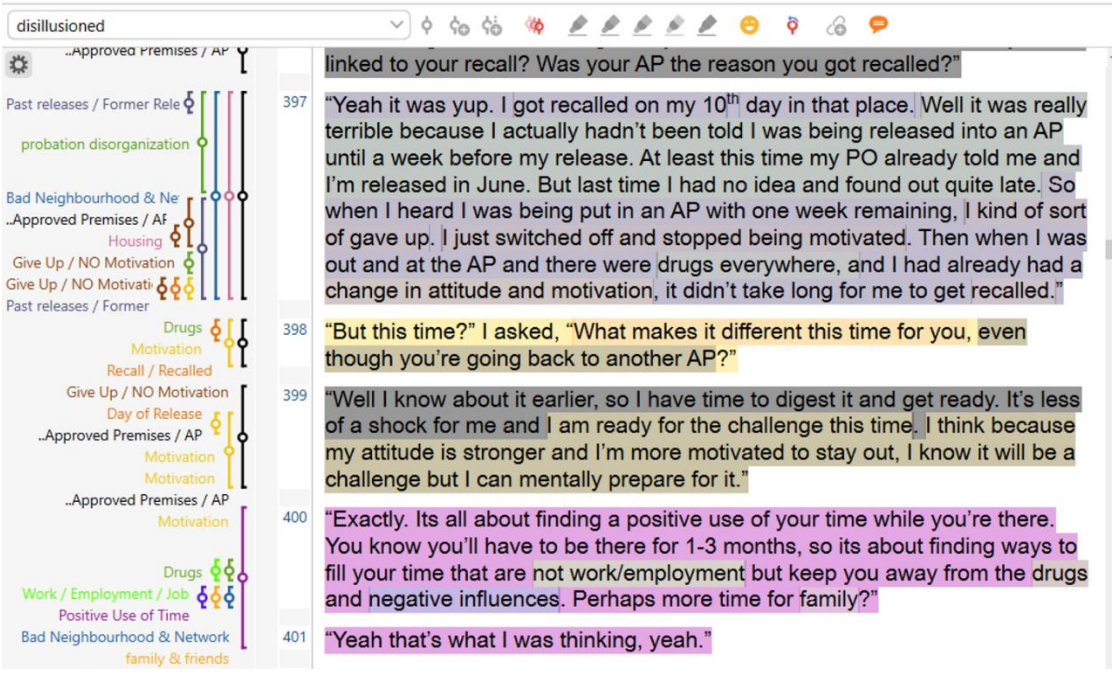

Figure 2. Example of open coding in MAXQDA, showing line-by-line annotation of interview transcript.

Abduction also shaped the treatment of discrepancies. Apparent contradictions between a man's interview narrative and my observational notes, or between participants' accounts and RESTART's database, were not treated as validity threats but as invitations to think analytically about audience, performance, and context. In this way, divergence itself became data about how men positioned themselves relative to institutional expectations and self-evaluations.

The abductive approach therefore provided two payoffs. First, it allowed empirical categories to be refined into concepts attuned to temporality and alignment. Second, it ensured that findings were not presented as linear derivations from data but as situated interpretations, grounded in fieldwork yet responsive to theoretical challenge. The following subsections outline how this abductive logic was operationalised through temporal coding (1.3.2), chronopolitical alignment matrices (1.3.3), mechanism memos (1.3.4), and cross-case comparison (1.3.5).

1.3.2 Temporal Coding

A central aim of the analysis was to capture how experiences unfolded across time rather than treating interviews or fieldnotes as static snapshots. To do so, I developed a temporal coding scheme that tagged segments of data according to their position in the resettlement process: pre-release anticipation, day of release, one month, and the longer drift beyond licence expiry. This approach foregrounded sequencing — not just *what* men reported, but *when* they reported it. This analytic approach is also what informed the layout of this monograph and how I would eventually decide to present the data in this thesis (chapters organized temporally – Pre-release; One Month; The Long-run; Desisted, Month 18.

Temporal coding also enabled the analysis of co-occurrence patterns, where certain themes repeatedly clustered around particular stages. For instance, codes relating to "Homeless / Sleeping Rough" frequently co-occurred with "Give Up / No Motivation" during the "Pre-Release" timepoint,

underscoring how housing precarity was not an isolated barrier but one that intersected with recall risk and motivational strain at critical junctures (see Figure 3). The coding scheme flagged episodes of waiting as governance and temporal compression, alongside candidate temporal anchors (routines, dependable ties).

Coded Segments	Codes	Timepoint
He doesn't seem motivated to get out and stay out	Give Up / NO Motivation	Pre-Release
He didn't really want our help		Pre-Release
"Yeah but I guarantee I'll be back here by Christmas"	Give Up / NO Motivation	Pre-Release
I've been arrested and sent here 9 times this year. The guards have bets on how long I'll stay out everytime I'm released.	Give Up / NO Motivation Recall / Recalled Past releases / Former Releases	Pre-Release
I was close to having the record for shortest release, I missed it by 20 minutes.	Give Up / NO Motivation Past releases / Former Releases	Pre-Release
He said: But honestly, Id rather be in here. Its not that bad. And its better than sleeping in a tent. I know everyone in every wing now – ive been in A, B , C that one (he points), that one. I know everyone and they all know me. I mean last time I was here I was with my nephew, my brother-in-law, it was like a whole fucking family reunion.	Give Up / NO Motivation family & friends Housing Homeless / Sleeping Rough	Pre-Release
Id rather be here for Christmas than a tent.	Give Up / NO Motivation Feeling Set up to Fail Housing Homeless / Sleeping Rough	Pre-Release

Figure 3. Example of temporal and thematic coding in MAXQDA, showing co-occurring codes assigned to segments from 'Pre-Release' timepoint

Moreover, by aligning codes with temporal markers, it became possible to trace shifts and recurrences across participants' trajectories – how the prevalence and nature of "Disillusioned" codes, for example, changed across timepoints (see Figure 4).

Code	Segment	Timepoint
disillusioned	I was better off in prison, to tell you the truth.	Day of Release
disillusioned	There's nothing we can do	Day of Release
disillusioned	Here we go again.	Day of Release
disillusioned	It's [motivation] dissolved completely	Month 1
disillusioned	But there's bets that I'll be back in on Friday, if not before. I think I will be back in before Friday. The reason I say that is that I haven't gotten any payment of Uc and they've cancelled my claim because I was back in prison, and how can I live with no income? I have to resort to crime? So they've left me no choice but to commit crime again. So yeah, I'll have to be back inside by Friday.	Month 1
disillusioned	How do they expect me not to commit crime?	Month 1
disillusioned	"You've just got no chance at the minute" - RESTART worker	Day of Release
disillusioned	They want me to jump through f****ng hoops all the time and nobody is willing to jump through hoops for me.	Long Run (Month 2-17)
disillusioned	They leave me no choice but to commit crime.	Long Run (Month 2-17)
disillusioned	And to be completely honest, sometimes when I think about it. I would rather be inside.	Long Run (Month 2-17)

Figure 4. Table showcasing the code 'Disillusioned' across timepoints

Temporal coding thus provided the scaffolding for subsequent steps of analysis — enabling the construction of alignment matrices (1.4.3) and mechanism memos (1.4.4).

1.3.3 Chronopolitical Alignment Matrices

Building on the temporal coding scheme, I constructed chronopolitical alignment matrices that set system markers, participants' own narratives, and my observational notes alongside one another at each timepoint. The aim was not to 'triangulate' toward a single truth, but to make visible how different evaluative frames aligned or diverged over time.

Each matrix juxtaposed three columns:

1. System perspective: probation or RESTART records, e.g., recall status, housing allocation, employment

2. Participant perspective: interview accounts, informal conversations, self-narratives
3. Researcher perspective: fieldnotes, observations of appointments, informal settings

Over the course of five timepoints:

1. Prison
2. Pre-Release
3. Month 1
4. Long Run (2-17 months)
5. Month 18

	Self-Narrative	System	Researcher
Prison	Dependent on drugs; **disillusioned**; feeling unseen;	Long history of drug abuse and drug-related offending	Enrolled in RESTART; reports being '**forgotten**' before RESTART; reports "never receiving any support";
Pre-Release	**Motivated**; Seeking Employment; Wants to strengthen familial relationships; Plans to enrol in drug rehabilitation course;	Low risk; Not priority for housing; history of drug abuse;	Performed **motivated**; cautiously optimistic; developed plan w RESTART
Month 1	Homeless --> Drug use; "**I tried but** I'm homeless, what do they expect?"	**RECALLED**; Breach of license condition (sobriety);	Appeared to '**attempt' to desist**, though structural conditions (homelessness, lack of positive supports) posed immediate challenge
Long Run (2-17)	"Will try to use time inside to get clean"	In Prison for 4 weeks	Told us he would try to use time inside to get clean; frustrated to be back in prison; reported feeling "**set up to fail**" and that **recall** was "unfair but innevitable"
Month 18	"I'm not really sure what you guys can do for me"; "There's **nothing we can really do";**	**RECALLED** twice more over the next 16 months, always for license breaches; not high enough risk or priority for housing;	Sees a man who is never given the opportunity to 'attempt' desistance as structural impediments close most pathways; Each recall he reports **losing hope** -- in himself and ultimately in RESTART;

Figure 5. Example chronopolitical alignment matrix, juxtaposing probation records, participant narratives, and researcher fieldnotes at sequential stages of resettlement**.** Text in red indicates negative evaluations, text in green indicates positive evaluations.

By layering different accounts of progress across temporalities, the matrices foregrounded misalignments in temporal evaluation (see Figure 5). For example, where probation registered

compliance, participants voiced drift, or my observations suggested stagnation. Rather than treating such discrepancies as validity problems, they were read as substantive findings, revealing how 'progress' was differently constructed by institutional, personal, and ethnographic lenses.

Methodologically, the matrix acted as a bridging device between coding and theorisation: a way of moving from descriptive categories toward mechanism memos that captured how alignment and misalignment unfolded over time (see Section 1.3.4). References to alignment and misalignment across Chapters 2–6 are grounded in these matrices; for readability, he matrices themselves are not reproduced in-chapter, though selected snapshots are provided in the Appendix.

1.3.4 Mechanism Memos

The alignment matrices did not provide conclusions in themselves but served as scaffolds for analytic generalisation. To move from descriptive juxtaposition to explanation, I wrote mechanism memos: short analytic documents that captured the processes underlying alignment and misalignment at particular timepoints. Each memo distilled patterns observed across cases into provisional mechanisms. For example, when probation records marked a participant as "compliant" yet interviews voiced despair and observations showed isolation, I coded this as a mechanism of *"paper compliance masking drift"*. Similarly, where early scaffolding through housing and licence conditions appeared stabilising but gave way to renewed precarity after licence expiry, I memoed a mechanism of *"short-term scaffolding producing long-term fragility"*.

These memos acted as bridges between case-level data and theoretical abstraction. They were recursive: drafted after initial coding, revised in light of new data, and later synthesised into cross-case comparisons. Importantly, they also functioned as a site of reflexivity. Writing forced me to articulate why I interpreted divergences in a certain way, what assumptions I was making, and how my positionality shaped these interpretations. Particularly as 'Researcher' was one of the evaluating

perspectives within the Chronopolitical Alignment Matrices. Thus, I had to remain reflexive about how my own assumptions of 'progress' or 'success' sometimes aligned with, and at other times diverged from, those of the system and of the men themselves.

Rather than treating mechanisms as universal laws, the memos framed them as contextually situated explanations of how supervision, scaffolding, and temporal misalignment shaped men's lives (see Figure 6). They formed the building blocks of the later cross-case comparison (Section 1.4.5) and underpinned the conceptual contribution of this thesis.

Case: Lewis, 12 months post-release

Perspective	Progress Evaluation
Self-Narrative	• "The job's just for show — no guarantee." • "I keep up with probation 'cos they'll nick me otherwise. Doesn't mean I'm sorted." • "Flat's a mess, I'm behind on rent. I don't know how long I'll keep it."
System Records	• "In employment" (temporary warehouse contract) • "No licence breaches" • "Stable housing" (private rental recorded)
Researcher	• Interview conducted in near-empty flat; fridge contained only milk and leftover takeaway container. • Lewis appeared restless, described "skipping shifts" at warehouse but emphasised to probation "I'm fine." • Tone of resignation; references to "going through the motions."
Memo: System evaluation frames Lewis as a "success story": employed, housed, compliant. Participant resists this narrative, emphasising precarity and disengagement. Researcher observations support participant's claims: minimal resources, signs of drift. Misalignment highlights how **formal metrics obscure underlying fragility.**	
Mechanism (Proposed): Short-term scaffolding produces alignment with system markers ('paper compliance'), while underlying conditions of instability and disengagement ('drift') remain hidden. Over time, this gap between formal evaluation and lived experience widens, leaving participants vulnerable to collapse once institutional scaffolding recedes.	

Figure 6. Example of mechanism memo ('Paper compliance masking drift'), showing how divergences between system records, participant narratives, and field observations were distilled into an analytic mechanism.

1.3.5 Cross-Case Comparison

The final stage of analysis involved systematic comparison across participants. Having developed mechanism memos for each case, I then examined them side by side to identify recurring conditions

under which evaluations of 'progress' converged or fractured. This stage was less about aggregating findings into uniform patterns than about tracing variations in timing, alignment, and divergence across the cohort. Pattern matching traced time-structured interaction – sequencing, pace and order – across cases

Cross-case comparison allowed me to investigate how similar mechanisms might produce diverging effects under different structural or temporal conditions. For instance, housing instability undermined progress for several men, but its effects varied depending on whether it coincided with early licence supervision or emerged later once other supports had arrived or receded. Accordingly, I traced how the same institutional intervention could produce divergent outcomes: scaffolding that stabilised one participant precipitated frustration and disengagement in another, depending on its timing. This comparative lens underscored the chronopolitics of misaligned desistance. By situating individual trajectories within a shared analytic frame, it became possible to see how institutional scaffolding, surveillance pressures, and personal intent interacted unevenly across cases and across time. Rather than generalising to a predictive model, the aim was to refine theoretical understanding of how fragile markers of 'success' are sustained, recalibrated, or unravelled over time.

1.4 Ethics, Vulnerability & Positionality

Working ethnographically with men leaving prison raised a series of ethical and positional challenges. Securing approvals, safeguarding confidentiality, and ensuring informed consent were necessary foundations, but they did not resolve the dilemmas that arose in practice. In this context, participants' vulnerability, the potential for perceived coercion in consent, and my institutional attachment to RESTART required explicit, ongoing work. Questions of access, immersion, and the blurred boundaries between observing and participating continually shaped what I was able to see

and how I interpreted it. My own positionality was never neutral: it filtered what participants shared with me, how practitioners involved me, and how I read the encounters I witnessed.

This section addresses these challenges in turn. It begins with approvals, consent and anonymity (1.4.1), then considers vulnerability, coercion and informed consent (1.4.2 gaining access and my relationship to RESTART (1.4.3), dilemmas of immersion (1.4.4), and narrative performance, response bias and impression management (1.4.5), before turning to positionality, power and the research gaze (1.4.6) and researcher safety (1.4.7).

1.4.1 Approvals, Consent, Anonymity

Although ethical clearance was secured from the University and National Research Council prior to fieldwork, ethics were less a matter of formal compliance than of continuous negotiation.

Standard written consent was not always feasible or appropriate in custodial contexts. Literacy barriers, institutional rules about paperwork, and participant unease with signing forms that mention imprisonment necessitated verbal consent protocols approved by the University, with clear, plain-language information given beforehand and reiterated at the start of each interview. Safeguarding overrides and confidentiality limits were explained at every stage. Interviews were audio-recorded only where setting and consent allowed; otherwise, I reconstructed accounts during or immediately afterwards in fieldnotes.

Moreover, informed consent, for instance, could not be secured once and for all in ethnography. ‘Go-along’ methods made this particularly challenging. Many encounters were fleeting or informal – conversations in corridors, car rides between appointments, exchanges after group sessions. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note, insisting on written consent for each moment would undermine the spontaneity on which ethnography depends. Instead, I adopted a model of “process consent” (Dewing, 2007), where information and reassurance were revisited throughout, and

participants retained the option to disengage at any point. The specific vulnerabilities of this population, and the implications of perceived coercion for informed consent, are developed further in Section 1.4.2.

Mobility also blurred the line between formal and informal interaction: participants or staff might not have always been conscious that their off-hand remarks in a car were part of the ethnographic record. I therefore clarified in consent discussions that my fieldnotes would include observations from all contexts of accompanying staff, not just structured interviews. In moments where I judged men to make comments that felt out of character, unusual or unexpected, I would pause to verbally re-confirm their consent in the moment. Consent, therefore, was revisited, re-negotiated, and revocable at any point (Dewing, 2007).

Protecting confidentiality in the context of overlapping supervision regimes posed particular challenges. Participants' lives were already monitored by probation, police, drug services, and housing providers. I often witnessed moments where disclosure to me – for example, a casual remark about drug use or contact with a co-defendant – carried potential consequences were it to be shared with prison or probation staff. I made clear that I was not part of the supervisory apparatus, but this boundary was not always simple to maintain. As Rhodes (2001) highlights, researchers in carceral spaces are often drawn into what she calls "ethnographic dilemmas of disclosure": situations where silence risks complicity, while disclosure risks betrayal. My guiding principle was that I would not pass on information unless there was an immediate and serious risk of harm.

Anonymity was preserved throughout both writing and analysis. All participants were assigned, and referred to by, pseudonyms during analysis and writing. Potentially identifying details (family structures, offence specifics, and neighbourhoods) were either removed, reported at a higher level of generality, or, where necessary, altered at the point of writing. Where locations might have revealed a participant's identity, they were replaced with stand-in sites of a similar size, character, or regional profile, in order to preserve analytic integrity while preventing recognition. Regional markers or locations that are already in the public domain and central to the policy context are retained, while

more granular places are either reported in broader terms (for example, as a hostel or small town within the Thames Valley area) or anonymised using consistently applied pseudonyms that preserve key analytical features such as size, rural–urban character, and role within local housing pathways. Organisational actors are referred to generically (e.g. "a RESTART worker") unless senior roles made anonymity impossible without undermining clarity. Where I drew on RESTART's internal databases, demographic and case information was anonymised at the point of extraction. In finalising the manuscript, I reviewed these anonymisation decisions to ensure that protection of identity did not come at the expense of accuracy or give the impression of composite or fictionalised accounts.

1.4.2 Vulnerability, Coercion & Informed Consent

Prisoners and recent prison-leavers are widely recognised as a vulnerable research population. In this study, that vulnerability was not only a matter of individual histories of trauma, substance use and poor mental health, but also of structural position: most men's housing, income and daily movements were subject to conditions imposed by courts, prisons, probation and welfare agencies. As outlined in Sections 1.1 and 1.2, and summarized in Table 1, the cohort was characterised by high rates of homelessness, addiction and cumulative disadvantage. In this context, informed consent was especially fragile. Decisions about participation were made in settings structured by supervision and dependence on scarce support, where declining an interview or asking to stop might *feel* risky even when no formal consequences would follow. This section therefore focuses on how such vulnerability and institutional control complicated the ideal of free, informed consent in this study.

Within this setting, the principal ethical risk was that consent might be offered under real or perceived coercion. Men met me in sites where attendance was mandated – the prison, probation offices, RESTART appointments – and many were reliant on RESTART workers for practical help with housing, benefits or healthcare. Refusing participation could therefore feel risky even if no explicit

pressure was applied. Some men might have initially assumed I was part of the supervisory apparatus or a RESTART worker in training rather than an independent researcher. Even once my role was clarified, the wider context of surveillance and scarcity meant they could still experience a diffuse obligation to comply, either to secure scarce help or to avoid jeopardising existing relationships. These concerns recurred throughout fieldwork, underscoring that the voluntariness of consent was an ongoing ethical question rather than something that could be settled at the beginning of fieldwork.

Mitigating these threats required both adherence to formal procedures and practical strategies in day-to-day interactions. Formally, the study followed the university and national ethics approvals described in 1.4.1, including a process-consent approach and verbal consent scripts tailored for custodial and post-release settings. At the start of *each* encounter, I introduced myself as a doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford, explained that the research was independent of RESTART, the prison and probation, and emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary. I stated explicitly that declining to take part, or withdrawing later, would have no consequences for licence conditions, housing applications or access to RESTART support, and I revisited this reassurance periodically. In practice, I treated consent as fragile and revisable. If men appeared intoxicated, visibly distressed or preoccupied with an acute crisis, I postponed or curtailed interviews. During go-along observations, I checked that participants were still comfortable with my presence and allowed them to steer conversations away from topics they did not wish to discuss. Where my presence felt intrusive – for example in probation appointments or intimate discussions with RESTART worker – I explicitly offered to step outside or leave the meeting, and did so on several occasions. These measures did not erase the power asymmetries inherent in researching a population under supervision and in need of support, but they made those asymmetries more visible and subject to negotiation. They were aimed explicitly at reducing the extent to which coercion, perceived or otherwise, might constrain or distort participants' decisions about *whether* and *how* to take part. The next section builds on this discussion by examining how my institutional attachment to RESTART specifically shaped access, trust and the ethical stakes of consent.

1.4.3 Gaining Access & Relationship to RESTART

Gaining access was not simply a hurdle at the outset of the study, but a constitutive feature of the research itself. As with all ethnography, entry to the field was continually negotiated rather than given, shaped by institutional permissions, interpersonal trust, and my ability to demonstrate credibility. In the criminal justice context – where participants were under multiple layers of surveillance and supervision – the politics of access and the ethical stakes were especially pronounced. How one enters, remains in, and exits the field fundamentally shapes what is seen, what is recorded, and what becomes analytically possible. Formal access to the prison and community sites was mediated by the RESTART pilot programme, itself a product of local and national penal innovation. Securing permission required extensive correspondence with programme managers, probation officials, and university ethics committees. At each stage, the project had to be justified as both feasible and safe: feasible in that I could be trusted to gather meaningful data without disrupting practice, and safe in that my presence would not expose participants or staff to harm.

In practice, access was never a one-off event. Even after institutional consent, entry had to be continually renegotiated with prison and probation staff and the participants themselves. Each new encounter entailed an implicit question: why are you here, and what will you do with what you see? Gaining access was less about overcoming a single barrier and more about navigating a shifting terrain of permissions, silences, and resistances each time I entered and exited the field.

Two sets of relationships proved especially important to access and require particular attention: prison officers (i) and RESTART staff (ii).

i. *Gatekeeper, Gate-locker*

Research on illicit actors shows that access typically hinges on local brokers and slow trust-building; see Lusthaus's multi-year fieldwork with cybercriminals and his account of trust and informal

governance in extra-legal markets (Lusthaus, 2018; Lusthaus, 2018; Lusthaus and Varese, 2021). Individual prison officers operated as what Bosworth et al. (2005) call "gatekeepers of legitimacy": their approval had the power to determine whether my presence was normalised or resisted. At times, I encountered what Crewe (2006) terms the "gate-locker" dynamic, where individual officers or staff could exercise their discretion to limit what I could see, steering me towards certain meetings while excluding me from others.

Every ethnographer is reliant on gatekeepers, but in this study the term describes not an abstract role but a particular individual. One prison officer – assigned to RESTART during its earliest months – was the linchpin of my access. Before the team had keys or institutional standing, he legitimised my presence: he collected me at the prison gate, signed me in, drove me to and from sites, and – perhaps most importantly – debriefed me afterwards. These conversations were not simply logistical but interpretive, inducting me into the meanings of what I had seen. His framing inevitably influenced how I understood encounters, colouring my notes with the inflections of a seasoned officer's worldview. In this sense, he was not only opening the door but narrating what lay behind it.

If gatekeepers can be enablers, they are also selective. Crewe (2006) describes the "gate-locker" function: the ability not just to open doors but to decide which doors remain closed. This officer's discretion shaped my fieldwork in critical ways. There were days when he judged a meeting too sensitive for me to attend, or redirected me elsewhere. Sometimes the exclusions were explicit ("that's not one for you"), other times implicit, when a route was altered or a door left closed.

Because institutional architecture distributes power so asymmetrically, the dynamic was stark: he quite literally held the keys, and without him I could see nothing. Over time, as our relationship deepened, I gained scope to question or gently challenge these choices, but the structural reality of prison remained the same. With each challenge I risked jeopardising the access on which I depended, and he, too, risked jeopardising his authority by appearing to prioritise a researcher's access.

At the same time, his enabling function shaped the data itself. Because he was there, I saw things I might not have witnessed alone. Some participants were more restrained with him present; others were emboldened, keen to demonstrate progress to someone who wielded authority. In both cases, his presence inflected what was revealed, reminding me that ethnographic data is always co-produced. As Jewkes (2012) notes, prison staff often act as "cultural interpreters," mediating what researchers see and how they understand it.

This dual function – at once gatekeeper and gate-locker – illustrates how carceral ethnography is mediated through interpersonal trust and discretionary power. The officer's judgments were not arbitrary; they reflected his professional duty, his relationship with RESTART, and his view of what was appropriate for an outsider to witness. They also highlight the contingency of ethnography: what I saw was shaped by what he allowed me to see.

ii. *RESTART and Role Ambiguity*

Once these permissions were in place, my attachment to RESTART further complicated these dynamics. Because I joined at RESTART's inception, I was present for its earliest meetings, first client sessions, and initial negotiations with the prison. This early access positioned me at the boundary between insider and outsider: entering sites as "with RESTART" and therefore easily read as part of the wider apparatus of supervision and support. At various points, men, officers and partner agencies assumed that I was employed by RESTART or by the prison. This misrecognition was likely reinforced by my being a young, university-educated woman, a profile that closely resembled that of many probation officers and support workers in this setting. As in other settings where researchers are embedded in programmes, this ambiguity was both a resource and an ethical hazard.

Once RESTART had established authority and legitimacy in the prison, they became my main channel of access. Their role was overwhelmingly enabling. They did not simply admit me into spaces; they ushered me into conversations, introduced me to participants, and lent me a credibility I would not otherwise have possessed. When they drove me to appointments with men in the

community, their presence helped overcome participants' suspicion: if they vouched for me, I was, by extension, trustworthy. This echoes Bosworth et al.'s (2005) description of "sponsors," whose legitimacy no amount of paperwork can replace.

Unlike the officer's power, which was rooted in structural authority, RESTART's influence derived from relational legitimacy and embodied trust. They were not gatekeepers or lockers, but bridge-builders: translating my presence as a researcher into something recognisable and acceptable within the fragile trust networks of men leaving custody. Their introduction carried weight with participants, probation officers, and partner agencies, reducing the need for lengthy explanations of who I was or why I was there. Moreover, my affiliation with RESTART appeared to confer some of the trust reserved for support workers onto me, enabling participants to share with a degree of vulnerability and openness that might not otherwise have been possible. This same affiliation, however, heightened the risk that participation in the research would be experienced as obligatory or instrumental to maintaining access to RESTART support.

In response, I made the separation between my role and that of RESTART staff a routine and explicit part of fieldwork practice. In joint appointments and group settings, I introduced myself as a doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford rather than as "from RESTART", explained that the study was independent of the service and of probation, and stated that speaking to me was voluntary and would have no impact on licence conditions, housing applications or access to RESTART support (see 1.4.2). I did not report back to RESTART staff about who had declined, postponed or seemed ambivalent about talking to me, so that refusal did not become legible as a lack of cooperation or engagement with the programme. These practices did not eliminate the possibility that coercion, real or perceived, might shape decisions about participation, but they were designed to reduce the extent to which my attachment to RESTART constrained men's choices.

Regardless of these safeguards, RESTART's role undoubtedly shaped the kind of data I could collect. The very fact that I was introduced by RESTART meant participants encountered me in contexts

already framed by resettlement work. This encouraged disclosure about needs and aspirations — things they were accustomed to discussing with RESTART staff — but may also have foreclosed other narratives. Their enabling function was therefore both generative and delimiting: creating the conditions of openness but also subtly structuring the topics and tones of interaction.

The relationship also carried interpersonal ethical weight. Beyond formal protocols, much depended on trust. Individual RESTART workers did not have to extend the access they did. That they chose to reflected both a willingness to invest in me and their own stake in the programme. In their eyes, supporting my work was part of demonstrating RESTART's value. In this sense, I was not only dependent on them; RESTART was, in some ways, invested in me.

This mutuality complicates simple narratives of researcher exploitation. While I benefited from the team's labour, they too derived something: recognition, conversation, and a chance to debrief with an attentive outsider. In these moments, the RESTART workers' role blurred into that of participant, and the line between data and access became indistinct. As Liebling (1999) notes, staff are never merely conduits but themselves become part of the story.

Analytically, the fact that my ethnographic knowledge was shaped by the people through whom I gained access was not a weakness to be apologised for but a methodological reality that should be made explicit. To acknowledge RESTART's role is not to diminish participant agency or my analytical independence, but to situate knowledge in the relationships through which it was produced. In this way, the "bridge-builder" dynamic is not a background detail but a central methodological fact: RESTART's presence made the fieldwork possible and shaped what could be seen, heard, and ultimately written.

1.4.4 Dilemmas of Immersion

Immersion was central to the ethnographic strategy of this study, but it brought with it a series of ethical and methodological dilemmas. These were not incidental but constitutive of the research process, shaping both what I was able to observe and how I interpreted it. One such dilemma was complicity. As Crewe and Ievins (2021) remind us, ethnographers of punishment cannot escape being implicated in the systems they study. By working alongside RESTART, I benefited from institutional goodwill and occasionally from the coercive authority that compelled participants to attend appointments. My presence risked reinforcing, rather than merely observing, the supervisory logics of resettlement. This complicity could not be erased, only acknowledged and reflexively incorporated into the analytic frame.

Immersion also blurred the boundary between observing and participating. At times, RESTART workers or participants invited me to step in – to clarify a procedure, reassure a man, or offer a perspective. In these moments, I was no longer a neutral observer but an active part of the interaction. While this positioned me to witness resettlement struggles from within, it also meant that the data I gathered was shaped by the roles I was temporarily made to inhabit.

Questions of reciprocity were equally difficult to navigate. Critical debates ask whether researchers extract more than they give (Love et al., 2021), and in penal contexts this concern is acute. What did men gain from allowing me to shadow their lives? At minimum, I tried to ensure that presence did not burden them, that consent was genuine, and that my writing did not sensationalise their experiences. At times, participants themselves reframed the research as reciprocal: they described talking to me as a rare chance to be heard without judgment, or as a break from the relentless emphasis on risk and compliance. Still, reciprocity remained limited. While I contributed feedback to RESTART managers and offered insights to practitioners, the imbalance of benefit between researcher and researched could not be erased. Acknowledging this imbalance, rather than denying it, was central to ethical practice.

Finally, immersion foregrounded my own subjectivity. My moods, affective state, and background shaped what I noticed, what I recorded, and how I interpreted events. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) caution, there is no neutral vantage point in ethnography. Recognising this subjectivity was less about controlling for "bias" than about embedding reflexivity into the analytic process. Issues of personal and institutional safety, and the ways in which risk management constrained immersion, are discussed separately in Section 1.4.7.

1.4.5 Narrative Performance, Response Bias & Impression Management

Closeness did not simply create *better* data; it produced *different* data. As men moved across contexts, audiences, and moments in time, their accounts shifted, sometimes becoming inconsistent. These divergences, however, did not mark one version as more *true* than another. Instead, I read these variations as narrative performances – situated acts shaped by context, audience, and temporality – rather than distortions to be corrected. Patterns of who spoke, when, and under what conditions also meant that the data reflected systematic forms of response and non-response, raising questions about whose narratives could be followed in depth and whose were only briefly or partially accessible.

While most men who were eligible consented to be interviewed, not all remained in regular contact, with some cycling in and out of custody and others disappearing from view through disengagement, relocation, or the practical difficulties of locating them amidst the insecure landscape of release (see Figure 1 in 1.2.1). As a result, the longitudinal material in this thesis is weighted towards men whose lives were, at least intermittently, anchored in services or accommodation in ways that made them reachable, while the most volatile or precarious trajectories appear more fleetingly, through short-lived encounters, staff accounts or case records rather than sustained first-person narratives. This unevenness is not treated as a technical flaw to be corrected, but as part of the social reality of

resettlement and supervision: those most at risk of harm and reincarceration were also the hardest to follow ethnographically.

As Maruna (2001) and Presser (2009) remind us, stories are never neutral reports but situated acts of self-presentation. Men leaving custody were acutely aware of being evaluated – by probation, RESTART workers, and sometimes by me. Their narratives were therefore shaped by impression management, highlighting particular needs, progress, or setbacks depending on the perceived stakes of disclosure. Closeness, then, revealed how participants crafted stories in relation to shifting audiences and assumed expectations. For some, I was a sympathetic listener against whom to position themselves as striving or misunderstood. For others, my presence offered a stage on which to rehearse performances of responsibility, remorse, or 'readiness' for change. In all cases, the relationship itself shaped the form and content of what was shared.

Context also mattered. For instance, when conversations followed probation meetings, men often emphasised motivation and compliance – particularly when workers or officers were present. In contrast, in more informal encounters – chatting outside hostels, sitting in cars, or walking to appointments – they sometimes voiced doubt, frustration, ambivalence or relapse. These differences were not inconsistencies to be discarded, but data in themselves: they illustrated the ways participants calibrated self-presentation across settings and audiences. Sequential interviewing further complicated these performances. Men occasionally revised or contradicted earlier accounts, re-casting past events in light of new circumstances. Rather than treating such shifts as errors, I read them as analytically rich, revealing the fragility of desistance narratives and the ongoing labour of aligning self-story with lived experience.

My analytical stance, therefore, was to treat each account as a situated performance, revised and recalibrated across encounters. Contradictions were not discarded but read as evidence of the fragility of desistance and the effort required to make lives '*count'* within evaluative contexts. The same stance governed how I interpreted patterns of participation and attrition: whose trajectories could be

followed longitudinally, and whose appeared only in fragments, was taken as part of the empirical story of resettlement and supervision rather than as a purely technical limitation. In this sense, these methodological realities were not obstacles to validity but key objects of analysis. The very shifts and strategies that might appear as methodological noise became substantive findings, informing my understanding of how desistance was narrated, negotiated, and continually re-aligned in relation to different audiences.

1.4.6 Positionality, Power & the Research Gaze

A central tension in this study lay in the classed and institutional distance between myself and participants. As an Oxford doctoral researcher, white and middle-class, I inevitably carried forms of privilege and symbolic authority unavailable to the men I accompanied, many of whom were navigating poverty, stigma, and ongoing criminalisation. My gender and educational background intensified these dynamics. As a young, university-educated woman working under the banner of a support organisation, I resembled many of the probation officers and support workers men encountered, while also being marked as "from outside" the local worlds in which they lived. My Canadian nationality and accent sometimes became topics of conversation, prompting questions about where I was "from" and how I had come to be in an English prison. For many, these features made me seem approachable and trustworthy; for others, they reinforced a sense that I was aligned with professional, middle-class outsiders who moved in and out of their lives. This imbalance was never neutral: it shaped how the men perceived me, what they chose to disclose, and the risks they may have felt in speaking openly.

Sequential interviews and mobile methods softened these asymmetries, fostering encounters that felt more reciprocal: men leading me through their neighbourhoods, stopping for cigarettes, or narrating their anxieties in the car on the way to probation. Yet the structural gap remained. Rather than

pretending this divide could be closed, I approached it as an ethical condition of the field itself – requiring humility, attentiveness, and recognition that the knowledge I produced was always mediated by unequal positions of power and privilege.

Reflexivity was therefore not an optional add-on but an analytic tool. As Hammersley & Atkinson (2019) remind us, ethnography offers no neutral vantage point. The "research gaze" in this thesis is my own: situated, partial and shaped by my disciplinary training, political commitments and emotional responses to what I observed. My attachment to RESTART added a further layer. I relied on the team for access, contextual understanding and safety, and I cared about the relationships built over two years of fieldwork. This created subtle pressures in both directions: to present RESTART positively as an innovative, caring intervention, and, conversely, to foreground its limits in line with a broader critical stance on penal expansion. Being aware of and accounting for these pressures formed part of the reflexive work of analysis. Recognising the asymmetry of power sharpened, rather than undermined, analysis by showing how narratives were produced within encounters marked by hierarchy, trust, and positional difference. In this sense, positionality and power are not treated as background context but as constitutive of what this thesis can, and cannot, claim to show about desistance, resettlement and time.

1.4.7 Researcher Safety

Researcher safety was addressed both through formal procedures and through day-to-day judgments in the field. As required by university and National Research Council guidelines, a written risk assessment and lone-working protocol were approved prior to fieldwork, specifying acceptable locations for interviews, accompaniment arrangements, and check-in procedures (see 1.4.1). These formal safeguards provided a baseline, but they had to be interpreted continually in light of specific encounters and environments.

Ethnography called for accompanying men across and within a range of intimate environments, some of which required more stringent safety protocols than others. For example, accompanying staff into participants' accommodation sometimes involved entering unpredictable environments, including spaces where drug use was visible or where tensions with cohabitants were high. All such accompaniments or visits were conducted through and alongside RESTART workers. Participant meetings were always mediated through RESTART, as I never had direct contact with any of my participants and therefore could not arrange meetings independently. RESTART workers scheduled appointments, provided transport, and introduced me at each first encounter. Where I wanted to speak with men one-on-one, the RESTART worker would leave the two of us to chat in a public or semi-public space – for example in a café, hostel courtyard or during a walk – whilst remaining nearby in the same venue or returning at an agreed time to collect us.

Inevitably, my reliance on RESTART staff's own risk assessments, and my refusal to attend visits deemed too risky, shaped what I was able to see. Similar dynamics operated in the prison. Access was often curtailed by officers who judged certain meetings too sensitive, or who redirected me elsewhere when they anticipated conflict or distress. On days when tensions on the wings were high, I was sometimes asked to remain in offices or leave the establishment early, and I followed these instructions. In this sense, decisions about my safety were always entangled with institutional judgments about order, risk and appropriateness.

Researcher safety was managed through a combination of organisational and personal precautions. Organisationally, I aligned my movements with RESTART's risk assessments and lone-working practices. Personally, I treated my own discomfort as a legitimate signal. If a situation felt volatile – for example, where conflict appeared to be escalating in a shared house, or where a man arrived intoxicated and agitated – I shortened or postponed the encounter, explaining that we could rearrange at a calmer point. These were not dramatic incidents, but ordinary, cumulative judgments about when it was and was not safe to stay.

In both custody and community, immersion was always mediated by calculations of safety—both institutional and personal. While I aimed for as close immersion as possible, these limits meant that my data is necessarily partial. Yet this partiality is itself revealing: highlighting how risk management structures ethnographic access and produces silences, excluding the most volatile or precarious dimensions of men's lives from direct observation.

1.5 Methodological Scope & Limits

This section clarifies the scope of what the thesis can reasonably claim and acknowledges the methodological limits that shaped the data and analysis.

i. *Qualitative & Local*

This study is qualitative and local in scope. Its strength lies in depth rather than breadth: tracing lived processes of resettlement and desistance through ethnographic immersion rather than capturing representative prevalence. The findings are therefore not intended to patterns of prevalence or causal laws, but to illuminate mechanisms, processes, and the ways these unfolded in context. The study generates conceptual illumination rather than causal claims. Its value lies in its conceptual and theoretical contribution, showing how desistance can be understood as fragile, effortful, and temporally misaligned, rather than in its capacity for generalisable claims about statistical frequency or distribution.

ii. *Race and Racialisation (Scope Note)*

While this thesis does not centre race or ethnicity as an explicit analytical category, other scholars across the United States and United Kingdom have done so to powerful effect, demonstrating how racialisation structures criminalisation, punishment, and re-entry (see Bowling & Phillips 2002; Lammy 2017; Alexander 2010; Western 2006) In this study, race did not emerge as a primary

analytical mechanism in the observed micro-processes—timing, alignment, and the everyday work of keeping change going. Where racialised dynamics appeared, they are acknowledged descriptively, but they were not sufficiently patterned in the data to sustain a dedicated analytic thread. This is a scope decision rather than a claim of irrelevance. The analysis that follows focuses on temporal mechanisms and institutional logics; future work could extend these arguments by placing racialisation at the centre of the chronopolitics of desistance.

iii. *Reliance on Self-Report & Mediation*

Much of the dataset rests on participants' own accounts. These were not neutral statements of fact but narrative performances, shaped by audience, timing, and institutional context (as outlined in Section 1.5.4). Self-report carries the risk of partiality, exaggeration, or omission, but in this study such features were treated as substantive findings in their own right: indicators of how men positioned themselves within systems of supervision and support.

Organisational data were also mediated through institutional priorities. Platforms such as Meganexus and Assess Plan Track (APT) recorded recalls, appointments, and resettlement pathways in bureaucratic terms that often obscured the nuance of lived experience. These records did not provide an unfiltered reality but reflected the logics of measurement and accountability that structured RESTART's work.

Triangulating across interviews, fieldnotes, and organisational data helped mitigate these limits. Contradictions between sources were not smoothed away but read as productive tensions, highlighting how different actors framed resettlement differently. In this sense, the reliance on mediated accounts did not weaken the study but helped inform this thesis' central framework: illuminating the very processes by which prison-leavers' lives were narrated, documented, and evaluated.

iv. *Temporal Boundaries*

Fieldwork was conducted over an eighteen-month period, spanning pre-release preparation, the early weeks of resettlement, and the medium-term transition beyond licence expiry. This temporal horizon enabled close observation of short- and medium-term dynamics but necessarily excludes the longer arcs of desistance or relapse that may unfold years later. The analysis is therefore confined to the temporal window observed, with claims oriented to the immediacy and volatility of re-entry rather than to the durability of long-term trajectories. In early interviews, men frequently referred to their past, but events predating fieldwork were accessible only through their self-narratives, and although these were sometimes corroborated by probation, prison records, or other organisations, such verification was not always possible.

Acknowledging these limits is not a mark of weakness but a methodological stance. This thesis does not claim causal explanation or predictive capacity. Its findings are interpretive and conceptual, offering refinements to how desistance is theorised rather than generalisable models of *why* it occurs. The study identifies temporal mechanisms—acceleration, waiting and compressed horizons—and shows how they structure the meaning and recognition of progress, reframing desistance as a problem of timing and alignment rather than simple compliance. The study contributes to sociological and criminological debate at the level of mechanism and meaning. Its claims should therefore be read not as causal laws but as conceptual provocations, extending theoretical conversations about desistance, carceral ethnography, and temporality.

2 Pre-Release

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“Hi Kenny” his RESTART worker said, “tomorrow’s the big day. I just wanted to make sure you’ve got a ride for tomorrow?”

He kind of nodded. “Yeah, mums picking me up.”

“Good and she’s taking you to probation after?”

“Yeah.”

“And then to [city]?”

“To [city], yeah.”

“Okay great. Best of luck with the release tomorrow, Kenny” we said.

He smiled a small smile that might have implied excitement, then he reached to close his cell door.

Behind him, I noticed a clothing line made of string, with socks and other clothing drying in his cell over his bed. He was doing laundry before the big day.

(Fieldnotes, Pos. 707)

2 INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the two to four weeks leading up to release as a period of temporal compression within a politicised timescape. Rather than a neutral runway for paperwork and planning, the pre-release period is where penal time and temporal discipline — timetables, staged permissions and licence conditions — shape men's present and begin to pre-configure men's futures. Here the first misalignments emerge: men's hopes and priorities are set against the evaluative criteria of probation and housing authorities; institutional clocks—deadlines, review cycles and eligibility windows—open or close futures.

At this stage, the full cohort of 150 men who form the basis of the study were still in custody at HMP Bullingdon. No one had yet had the opportunity to 'succeed' or 'fail' in resettlement terms; what varied, instead, were their starting positions. The stories spotlighted in this chapter do not stand for the whole cohort, but they sit within the broader patterns outlined in Chapter 1: most men were preparing to return to poverty, insecure housing prospects and long histories of criminal justice contact, with very few approaching release from a position of stability.

The vignettes that follow show how the final days inside are saturated with anticipatory practices: conversations with support workers, the drafting of housing applications, and small acts of preparation in cells and on landings. These are less administrative than temporal – rehearsals of a future life under conditions that are only partly under one's control in an environment of temporal discipline.

The analysis situates these practices within scholarship on projective agency and anticipatory socialisation (Merton, 1957; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), showing how men imagine futures and test tentative identities within carceral routines and – crucially – in periods of waiting (Goffman, 1961; Crewe, 2011). Inside, waiting takes on a role of governance: queues, backlogs and waitlists organise access to people and resources, patterning when help can be accessed and on what schedule. Yet these efforts are further constrained by organisational gaps and fragmented services (Weaver, 2015;

Maguire, 2021), leaving men rehearsing futures already misaligned with the structures awaiting them.

This chapter asks not only *how* men plan for release, but *whose goals* they are preparing to meet: those imposed by probation and paperwork, those internalised from social expectation, or those authentically their own. Pre-release is a temporally ordered site where institutional timelines and evaluative standards set the terms of success: men fear not abstract failure but failure against these fixed timelines and expectations.

At this stage, the system, self, and support workers already begin to expect and evaluate progress on different terms and in different timelines. This misalignment[4], which presents itself as early as pre-release, risks destabilising resettlement from the outset, as institutional clocks rarely align with the tempo of men's own preparations.

2.1 DESCRIPTION

The final weeks before release were less a steady preparation than a set of improvised practices shaped by uncertainty. Men drafted housing applications, sketched training ambitions, and rehearsed stories of readiness — but often in ways that already revealed tension between what they hoped for and what the system could deliver. These preparations were not linear stages of transition but overlapping fragments of anticipation, woven into the routines of prison life.

The vignettes that follow show how release was imagined through small, everyday acts of preparation — filling in forms, weighing options, voicing anxieties — that made visible the early misalignments between institutional timetables and men's lived expectations. In this setting, penal time set the pace, and anticipation and apprehension hinged as much on timing as they did on context. Three short

[4] Analytical references to alignment/misalignment herein derive from the matrices described in Section 1.3.3.

vignettes organise the account: The Plan (2.1.1) shows how projective agency is scripted in pre-release meetings, as men are asked to imagine futures and plan for extended timelines from within an environment of short horizons, fixed schedules and rapid tempos; The Action (2.1.2) follows the last-minute housing scramble, as men are forced to wait until the very last moment before release for decisions that will shape their trajectory – experiencing waiting as a form of governance firsthand; The Unknowns (2.1.3) traces misaligned timelines, as late or absent decisions around housing, benefits and licence conditions can collapse rehearsed futures, leaving plans for work or family contingent on information that arrives – or does not – in time.

2.1.1 The Plan:

We perched in a small room off the main corridor on C-Wing's landing. A sofa lay close to the floor, with the leather peeling off, revealing the soft, cushion underbelly. There were two upholstered stools, one with a wooden leg missing, but still standing upright, the other with a series of stains only distinguished by their varying shades of 'dark'. Each landing had a meeting room like this, so that the resettlement team could meet with men one-on-one before release or so the governor could hold adjudications for men who were misbehaving and being sent to segregation. The room had been privy to it all, and the flaking, cracked and crumbling furniture endured to tell the story. Most of my pre-release visits were in these rooms. This is where RESTART would meet the men in the weeks leading up to their release to discuss their plans, hopes, ambitions. This is where RESTART came with good news and bad: giving men their first scaffolding to cling to or crushing men's dreams with the weight of reality before they'd even had the chance to try.

The only time we could meet with men was during 'free flow', when men were unlocked from their cells and allowed to move around their wing; time for planning and preparing had to be carved out the fixed and unforgiving rhythms of penal time. So there the three of us would sit, on tattered

furniture, hunched over a notebook, planning for the free world while the noise of incarceration served as our backdrop. Men were being asked to imagine extended timelines from within short horizons, fixed schedules and rapid tempos.

In these early sessions, RESTART asked men to identify priority areas for support, set short-term and long-term goals for those areas, and then together they would develop a plan for achieving those goals. Men were encouraged to speak candidly and openly about the challenges they had encountered, or anticipate encountering, with the aim of identifying an area of support that would be most suitable and relevant to their needs. On the surface the process was 'self-directed', but the framework was already institutional: RESTART's categories of support – accommodation, employment, sobriety, and others – shaped what goals *could* be named and pursued. Projective agency was being scripted through imposed categories and their assigned timelines.

"I think things would have been different if I had stayed in school." King, who had dropped out of school to work at 14 years old, was now 23 and finishing a five-year sentence for possession of more than £1 million in Class A drugs with intent to supply.

"I used to work at McDonald's; we all have to start somewhere. I was 15, coming home with £400 a week." He nudged me, smirking as he pointed at his Nike Air Max 90s: "See these? That's how I bought them."

While he wasn't quick to admit it, King wasn't working for the shoes. He was the eldest of six born to a single mother who was only 15 when she had him. The seven of them lived in a caravan park outside of High Wycombe. "My dad was in and out of Wandsworth[5], my mom was always crying, my little sisters were always running away."

Without having to say it explicitly, we understood why King dropped out of school at 14: *"*We had nothing. Everything I brought home went on bills or food or meds. And if my dad was out, we

[5] Wandsworth Prison

wouldn't see any of it." How he'd ended up serving 5 years? "We had nothing. And I couldn't stand to see my mom cry anymore," was all he would say. "But I think things would have been different if I had stayed in school. I always wanted to go to college."

"Do you think you guys could help me get into college?" I remember the boy who had spent his 18th through 23rd birthdays in prison, asking us in his first RESTART meeting. "Then I'd take some courses and get into bricklaying or mechanics, make clean money; money my mum could finally be proud of." King's sentiment was both an authentic aspiration and an institutional goal: lawful work as redemption, education as a pathway. In the room, these aligned. Later, their timing would not.

Once areas of support were identified, the men were asked to brainstorm a number of short-term and long-term goals in each of their concern areas. In other words, what would they like to achieve with RESTART's support? I sat with Darren, who had been in and out of prison more times in the last two years than many in my sample had in their entire lives. His cellmates called him 'boomerang' and even the prison staff referred to him as a 'prolific recall'. There in that cramped room, engulfed by the noise of the adjacent free flow, his RESTART worker asked him about his short-term and long-term goals. RESTART was asking him to dream, two feet away from where he'd only ever been asked to follow orders. "What is it that you want?" they would ask. And I sat watching, wondering, in all his time in and out of prison, in his dozens of releases, had anyone ever asked him this before.

"I really want a job"; "I really need to find housing, I have nowhere to live at the moment"; "I need to get a handle on my addiction, I feel it's gotten out of control"; "I don't think I'm in a good space right now, psychologically"; "I have no money, I don't know how I am going to stay out without any money"; "I want to make my mum proud"; the men would say, in part to their RESTART worker, in part to themselves.

"Peace" Darren finally spoke. "In here and in here" he pointed to his head before pointing to his chest, he swallowed hard, fighting back tears, and the room fell silent.

"And how might we be able to get you that peace, Darren?"

Some men described ‘successful resettlement’ as having a roof over their head; a space to call their own after sharing a cell for so long – even if that space was temporary. To others, successful resettlement might have meant control over their thoughts or addictions. To them, gaining support through a recovery network, therapy, or prescription medication seemed critical for securing some agency over their lives and their decisions. But for others, a job was exactly what they wanted first and foremost. I had one man say to me “I don’t care if I need to sleep in a park for the first month, if I can start going to work and saving money, after that month in the park I will be able to afford a small space of my own.” To him, employment was success – earning his own income signified agency more than a roof over his head did.

Of course, for many, these were tentative goals, being projected from within the prison space. The structural reality of release would undoubtedly demand men revisit and reshape these goals as men’s priorities and possibilities would change. At the moment, however, underlying these expressed goals were expectations: expectations the men had of themselves as well as expectations imposed onto them; by probation, supervision, family, RESTART, and even researchers such as myself. King and Darren’s goals illustrate this spectrum of ownership: some aims may have been externally imposed (such as employment or sobriety), others perhaps internalised through social markers (making one’s mother proud), while some may have been personal and self-defined (peace).

After men had identified areas of concern and outlined their goals—self-defined or imposed—RESTART joined them in the development of actionable plans to work towards achieving those goals. Whenever possible, they would begin to take action immediately, pre-release.

“Do you think you guys could help me get into college?” King had asked.

“Yes of course we can.” King’s RESTART worker sounded. “Let’s get you enrolled in a CSCS course[6] straight away, and we can have a look at a college local to you when you’re out and

[6] Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS)

settled…We'll also get you set up with a government-issued ID, as most colleges will require some identification," his RESTART worker continued while taking detailed notes. "If we order one in the next few days, we can hopefully have it ready for when you're out."

Already then, as RESTART sketched out their plans for how to help men achieve their identified goals, they imposed their own expectations on them. Underlying the very practice of co-producing resettlement 'plans' was the RESTART team's *own* expectations of what achievement looks like, and the timeline within which men *should be* achieving those goals. The choice to enrol King in a CSCS course, search for a local college and secure an ID were RESTART's. Men dictated a goal – real, internalised or imposed – and RESTART dictated *whether* and *how* that goal could be achieved.

In those early conversations, men's plans and RESTART's plans appeared aligned. Yet underlying each articulated goal was the potential for misalignment: men's expectation of when and how these goals would be realised, versus RESTART's expectations, versus the fixed schedules and inflexible expectations of supervision.

The final weeks before release were marked by hoping, planning, and preparation. These plans demonstrate not only men's efforts to articulate futures but the origins of chronopolitical misalignment, as externally imposed expectations and timetables risk standing in conflict with men's own aspirations. This is the work of projective agency within penal time: futures rehearsed in short windows, paced by institutional time, and vulnerable to later drift.

2.1.2 The Action:

If men articulated their goals, and RESTART dictated whether and how those goals *could* be achieved, the larger institutional framework dictated whether and how those goals *should* be achieved.

That morning, I sat with an internal prison housing specialist, an INGEUS worker[7], Warren's RESTART worker, and a concerned officer. Upon the request of Warren's RESTART worker, we had all assembled to address the elephant in the room: Warren was due for release in two days and still had no housing. This was, unfortunately, very common. Housing decisions arrived unpredictably – sometimes a council flat by chance, a last-minute CAS-3[8] allocation, or a charity placement. All decisions depended on probation referrals that were too often delayed or missing. The pacing, therefore, was set elsewhere, leaving those in the room waiting for decisions they could not themselves trigger.

As we waited, urgency filled the room. The housing specialist confirmed Warren had no referrals lodged. As everyone in the room suddenly appreciated how dire the situation had become, there was a shared, unspoken agreement: this was to become everyone's priority for the rest of the morning. As some went hunting for emails from Warren's probation officer to figure out exactly why a referral hadn't been made, the INGEUS employee phoned CAS-3: "How possible is it that we can get a spot?"

We waited.

"Any word from his probation officer?" Not yet.

"Any word from CAS-3?" Not yet.

Five excruciatingly long minutes later: "They have spaces!" The INGEUS employee called out. "So he can be considered but it's not a guarantee. And he won't know until the day before release." It was temporal compression in miniature: waiting operated as governance as essential decisions were squeezed into narrow windows on the eve of release.

[7] a commissioned rehabilitative service in HMP Bullingdon
[8] Community Accommodation Service Tier 3, a UK government-funded initiative providing temporary accommodation and support for up to 84 days (12 weeks) to prison leavers at risk of homelessness (HMPPS 2025; HMPPS 2021)

"Okay well that's a start. Let's get him in here to fill out a support form" the housing specialist ordered. The RESTART worker drafted an email to Warren's probation officer to do a 'Duty to Refer' (DTR)[9] for council housing, just in case. Meanwhile the officer ran to fetch Warren, and I was tasked with printing the referral form. The sense of urgency increased further still: Things were happening, but they had to happen quickly. A shrinking present left Warren's future contingent until these very final moments.

When Warren arrived, his first question was inevitable: "Did you guys find me housing yet?" "No. But we're working on it," his RESTART worker answered from behind one of the computers across the room. "I'm out in two days", Warren panicked. "This is fucking ridiculous – why do they always do this to me?!" His frustration matched the logic of the room: the pace was set elsewhere, leaving Warren, like the rest of us, with no power over the timing of decisions, waiting until his future was decided for him.

His RESTART worker reassured him that they were working on it. "In the meantime, I need you to fill out this application for council housing. Write what makes you desperate, write about your sobriety, your experience of homelessness, and how being housed would help you turn your life around. Helen will help you. I will send off this email to your probation officer."

And off he went. He hunched over a tiny table, scribbling his life story and spelling out his desperation. Watching him have to justify why he deserved a roof over his head was painful. What made it sadder was that he had clearly done this before. When I offered to help, he shrugged: "No don't worry, I'll write what I always write" He rushed and rushed, pouring his life out into clunky paragraphs on the four-page application form: addiction, sobriety, homelessness, recovery. Warren already knew the script. And in fact, so did the others in the room: "Don't worry about that part" his

[9] An application made by specified public authorities in England to formally notify a local housing authority that a service user is homeless or at risk of homelessness (DLUHC, 2018)

RESTART worker would occasionally say, “I can fill that out for you.” And Warren would skip and jump to the next question and begin yet another paragraph of routine pleading.

The scene captured the collision of administrative and lived time. As staff worked frantically to file forms in compressed timelines, and housing – an essential scaffold – was reduced to a last-minute lottery, men like Warren were left unable to forecast their futures, not knowing where they would be living in two days’ time. The scene also illustrates how pleading itself has become institutionalised – enacted by men as routine and accepted by staff as a legitimate signal of need. Warren was familiar with the script of desperation, recycling phrases he had used before. His help-seeking was not incidental but part of a broader patterned strategy: men learned to frame their lives in ways that made need legible to overstretched staff and systems of scarcity. Vulnerability, then, was not simply lived but performed, as a strategy to maximise the chance of recognition in a system where the relentless pacing overlooked quiet desperation, where resources were always insufficient, and where attention was always short.

And Warren’s case was not unique. Across Bullingdon, overcrowding and understaffing meant important applications and release preparations were being made as late as one or two days before release, and service delivery was terribly inconsistent and disorganized. Applications for council housing were often left undone or submitted too late, as prison and probation staff assumed others had taken responsibility. Rather than an integrated services approach, the combination of multiple services in the prison meant that, in practice, the duty was not being upheld by anyone and was being accidentally overlooked by everyone. These findings are not novel to this study, as the issue of administrative inefficiencies exists across UK prisons. Research on homelessness among UK prison leavers similarly found that housing referrals were rarely submitted, and when they were, they were submitted late, leaving councils little time to respond (Madoc-Jones et al., 2019). Such delays were attributed to the heavy caseloads faced by prison staff. Given Bullingdon’s documented staffing shortages (HMIPPS, 2023) and capacity pressures (Independent Monitoring Board, 2022), it is unsurprising that the duty was frequently neglected here as well.

In short, Warren's morning of desperation was symptomatic of a broader systemic pattern. The dearth of communication between services, disorganization in the prison, and absence of a unified strategy meant that I witnessed alarming situations, like the morning searching for Warren's housing two days before his release, far too often. The pre-release period, therefore, was not marked by a steady progression but a series of misalignments, producing an inconsistent rhythm. For every calm conversation outlining goals and ambitions for the future, there were last-minute races against the clock. Whilst RESTART worked to prepare men for their release, the persistent gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground implementation in the prison left the pre-release process rushed and disorganized. Warren's case shows how, on the eve of release, men are compelled to wait until the last possible moment for decisions that steer their trajectory – experiencing waiting as a form of governance firsthand.

2.1.3 The Unknowns:

Finally, if men articulated their goals, RESTART dictated whether and how those goals *could* be achieved, the larger institutional framework dictated whether and how those goals *should* be achieved, the wider resettlement landscape, with its structural inequality and limited scaffolding, ultimately dictated whether and how goals *would* be achieved in practice.

This was the last in-prison meeting between Cail and his RESTART worker before we'd all be meeting again in the parking lot on the morning of his release in three days. They were tying up "loose ends" — a phone arranged, a GP appointment scheduled for the day he got out, but accommodation was still under discussion with the council. The Offender Management Unit (OMU) was in the process of trying to secure council housing that would be suitable for himself and his six-year-old son. "I'm flexible, I'll sleep on the street for a few weeks, really, if I have to. And my son can stay with his grandparents, just until they've found us a place." Cail also had a job interview

lined up before release. “They’re coming in to see me!” He announced. “It’s a big week for me” he said, smiling.

Three days later, on a rainy Thursday morning at the gate, we’d learned Cail had got the job, but the offer was contingent on him having a permanent address. We also learned that the OMU had been unsuccessful in securing him council housing. Cail’s case illustrates how even detailed plans could be undone by a single, indeterminate factor. Housing was the hinge on which employment, family reunification, and health appointments turned; without it, every other goal was rendered provisional.

Uncertainty also shaped Jay’s final meetings. Only 20, with a severe learning disability, he arrived cheerful, a plastic mug full of coffee in hand, “I was hoping to see you today" he beamed. Then he asked what we’d been dreading: “So what’s the good news you’ve come to share?” There was none. And by the sound of Jay’s RESTART worker’s ruffling through papers quickly, I could tell he didn’t know anything that I didn’t know. He had updates of slow progress, but no news. Certainly not good news. The best his RESTART worker could offer were vague reassurances that “progress was being made.”

“I was really hoping you guys were coming today with good news.” I felt a sharp, sudden pang of guilt. “They released me last time with nowhere to stay” he continued. “Will I have to sleep on the streets, do you know?”

“You shouldn’t,” his RESTART worker sounded. In other words: he didn’t know.

“Will the council be able to find me somewhere after a few nights on the street though?”

He didn’t know.

“Or weeks, even?”

He didn’t know.

“Will they at least have my prescription ready for me at the gate to last me until I get it renewed?”

“We’d like to hope so” but he didn’t know.

These encounters revealed the temporal incongruence between men’s expectations of certainty at the threshold of release and the system’s tolerance for deferral. for RESTART, ‘getting the ball rolling’—emails sent, referrals lodged, calls chased—felt fast, but for Cail and Jay ‘progress’ translated into slow, elongated time, nights without a roof until a decision elsewhere finally arrived.

The pattern repeated. Marlon only discovered on release day that his probation office would be in Reading – far from his child and partner in Slough –, after months of applying for work, searching for residence and enrolling in courses in Slough. Ashley only learned at his first probation meeting whether licence conditions allowed him to see his children, collapsing his parenting goals overnight. And Sushil, an older man who had carefully assembled documentation for disability benefits[10], found his claim closed on release: “They told me to ‘apply again’, but how can I? ... I don’t need the money in six months, this is when I need it.”

Each discovery showed how administrative indeterminacy disrupted men’s projective agency. They had rehearsed futures with RESTART, but the late arrival of crucial information collapsed those futures into uncertainty, rendering imagined futures instantly unachievable and the routes they had adopted to get themselves there immediately futile.

The landscape of resettlement was therefore one of navigating unknowns, and every unknown carried the potential to dismantle men’s imagined trajectories completely. However diligent, RESTART could not eliminate foundational indeterminacy: the timing of decisions, the withholding of information, the dependence on absent authorities. At best, they could accompany men through the uncertainty — but they could not resolve it. This revealed not only an incongruence between RESTART and the men’s expectations, but a misalignment between both of their expectations and the structural realities that govern resettlement.

[10] Formally called ‘Limited Capability Benefits Payment’

2.2 DISCUSSION

Building on the preceding accounts of planning and preparation, this discussion reads pre-release as projective agency and anticipatory socialisation under conditions of waiting (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Merton, 1957). Preparing for release involved more than securing housing or benefits; it was also about narrating futures and performing readiness while access to people and resources was governed by queues, referrals and eligibility windows.

What emerges is not linear progression but a fragile rhythm under temporal compression shaped by four dynamics that structure the sections that follow: Securing Scarce Time (2.2.1) shows how, in the rushed and impersonal tempo of institutional timeline, men learn to perform need to secure scarce time and attention; Signalling Readiness, Forcing Momentum (2.2.2) illustrates that men display readiness by naming immediate, near-term goals and forcing momentum, even when they suspect it may not materialise; Out of Time (2.2.3) demonstrates how fear accrues as waiting shrinks the present: deadlines draw near while critical decisions do not, leaving institutional time to set the cadence and trajectory of men's futures; Finally, Left Waiting (2.2.4) shows how resignation takes hold when answers do not arrive in time, institutional time fails to align with men's plans, and their imagined futures collapse into contingency, leaving men feeling powerless and abandoned as the system's tempo refuses to meet theirs. Taken together, these dynamics show how rehearsed futures sit alongside ambivalence, anticipation of failure and, at times, resignation; desistance-related practices are already shaped – and sometimes curtailed – by the chronopolitics of misaligned expectations before men ever reach the gate.

2.2.1 Securing Scarce Time

When reviewing the contents of early conversations, it is essential to analyse them contextually: what men said may not have been an honest expression of their beliefs, but rather a product of the conditions of prison life. Scarcity defined these encounters. Shortages of staff time, privacy, interpreters, induction support, and rehabilitative opportunities meant that disclosure was rarely straightforward. Men competed for attention in an overcrowded and resource-stretched system. Conversations took place hurriedly, through cell doors or in noisy induction wings, and were shaped by the pressure to condense complex lives into brief encounters to keep up with the unceasing pace of penal time. In this setting, help-seeking and goal-setting became strategic performances aimed at securing scarce minutes: recognition followed visible need, not silent plight, as access was paced by waiting and triage.

Masculine prison codes heightened this precariousness. To present oneself as vulnerable in prison risked ridicule, disbelief, or predation. Disclosing need and help-seeking, therefore, had to be managed carefully, often reframed as defiance or toughness (Jewkes, 2005; de Viggiani, 2012; Sykes, 1958). Warren's housing application illustrates the point. His plea was not simply a statement of need, but a performance calibrated to secure recognition in a system where attention was scarce—an interaction shaped by institutional "soft power" and evaluative gazes (Crewe, 2009; Crewe, 2011). To ask for help was also to risk appearing desperate, so appeals balanced vulnerability with credibility; past harms justified difficulties without marking men as weak (Jewkes, 2005; Ricciardelli, 2014). Other men narrated trauma in tones of bravado, recasting wounds as obstacles survived, so that vulnerability could be shown without status loss. Scarcity and masculinity intertwined: scarce attention had to be earned, but earning it without losing credibility required a performance of toughness alongside vulnerability.

Enrolling in RESTART itself became part of this economy of scarcity. Men framed their interest in the programme in ways that signalled need while protecting status (a dynamic explored further in

2.2.2). Some presented enrolment as a tactical move — a way of securing scarce scaffolding for release planning. Others minimised their needs, reluctant to be seen as desperate, while still trying to ensure they were not overlooked. One described a technique of "shouting loudest to be noticed," while others described "staying quiet until getting a chance to speak properly." Either way, the aim was the same: to convert scarce attention and time spent waiting into usable minutes and concrete action.

Scarcity also meant that disclosing need had stakes beyond the immediate moment. A man who successfully conveyed need might be prioritised for RESTART support, but he also risked being categorised as 'high-need' or *beyond* support. Those who minimised their problems could protect masculine standing but risked being overlooked. Either path was a gamble. It was an act of emotional labour borne of an environment whose pace demanded it: anticipating the evaluative gaze of staff and packaging one's life to garner credibility accordingly.

This dynamic aligns with Crewe's account of tightness and soft power, where care and control are intertwined (Crewe, 2009; 2011). Waiting operated as governance: queues, referrals and eligibility windows rationed attention and decided when – and whether – help could be accessed at all. Here, the scarcity of support amplified the soft power of RESTART staff: men had to present themselves as 'deserving' to secure scarce staff time and resources, mirroring wider welfare conditionality.[11]

The act of telling one's story was therefore shaped not only by personal readiness but by compliance with institutional rationing: stories were packaged to fit short slots and eligibility criteria; affect was calibrated to be legible without stigma. Scarcity intersected with masculine codes not to suppress vulnerability entirely but to recalibrate it—toughness cues alongside admissions of need—producing a paradox: to access scaffolding one must disclose need while stripping it of visible emotion (Jewkes, 2005; de Viggiani, 2012; Ricciardelli, 2014).

[11] Refers to the conditionality that now defines access to welfare support, where entitlements are tied to performances of compliance and responsibility (Dwyer, 2004; Patrick, 2017; Wacquant, 2009).

This paradox matters for how desistance is understood. Narrative criminology emphasises the importance of storytelling in constructing desisting identities (Maruna 2001), yet in contexts of scarcity these stories are not freely told; they are constrained by institutional economies and cultural codes. Help-seeking becomes invisible work: emotional labour, strategic self-presentation, and careful risk management — work invisible to policy logics yet central to sustaining desistance.

Scarcity also blurred the line between scaffolding and surveillance. To disclose trauma or need was to risk closer monitoring, increased intervention, or new labels. Men were acutely aware that what they revealed could be recorded, passed on, or used to judge their risk. As such, enrolling in RESTART could secure support, but it also extended surveillance, bringing men under closer observation. This duality — support that also surveils — is a thread that runs through the thesis (particularly Chapter 4), but it is already visible here at the point of pre-release. What emerges is that enrolment in RESTART was not a neutral act but a survival strategy within conditions of time and resource scarcity and masculine constraint. Men had to fight for attention, manage impressions, and perform readiness even as they sought recognition of vulnerability.

Pre-release planning unfolded in an environment saturated with scarcity: too few beds, too little time, overstretched services. Men's goals were strategically narrated within that constraint. As Warren's case illustrated, pleading and self-presentation became institutionalised routines — recognised steps for accessing limited provision. Vulnerability, then, was not the opposite of agency but the exercise of it: an agentic strategy to be seen and secure scarce time within a rushed and stretched system.

What emerges is that enrolling in RESTART was not only about narrating one's past and asking for support, but about managing impressions under conditions of scarcity and evaluation. Men had to fight for attention, perform credibility, and present vulnerability in ways that would be recognised as legitimate – or risk being left unseen or unsupported. The environment shaped not just *what* was said but *how* it could be said.

This also sets the stage for the following section (2.2.2), which examines how motivation itself could be signalled and paced — and how men's apparent 'readiness for change' must be understood within the same economy of scarcity and performance, where being seen as motivated was itself a route to accessing support.

2.2.2 Signalling Readiness, Forcing Momentum

This subsection interrogates the strong presentations of motivation that often surfaced in the early stages of enrolment with RESTART. Men were encouraged to articulate goals, identify priorities, and frame their release in terms of positive change. In these first encounters, motivation frequently appeared self-evident: participants arrived with aspirations already in hand, or readily voiced goals when prompted. Yet such displays should be read carefully. They may reflect genuine hopes for resettlement, but they may also draw on the institutional language available, functioning as pragmatic performances of 'readiness'. Temporal discipline calibrated what counted as readiness and when it had to be shown. In practice, therefore, motivation did not simply appear; it had to be *signalled* and it had to be *near-term*: men showed readiness by naming immediate goals and forcing movement within short windows.

Prison is rarely a space where men are made to feel empowered. The men's strict regimes and the broader carceral environment work to actively minimise a man's agency and control (Crewe, 2009; Crewe, Hulley & Wright, 2017; Jewkes, 2005). By contrast, in a context otherwise designed to curtail autonomy, RESTART – in principle – provided one of the few spaces where men could rehearse agency. RESTART presented itself as self-directed: men were encouraged to choose priority areas of support, to define success in their own terms, and to enrol voluntarily. Yet this was agency within bounds: in practice, the 'choices' on offer were structured through institutional categories such as RESTART's available support areas: accommodation, employment, or addiction. Men could select

between these domains but remained bound by what 'counted' as a legitimate goal. The apparent empowerment was therefore partial: it gave the form of choice while constraining the substance of what support could be imagined and delivered. Waiting structured this further: access to people and resources moved on institutional clocks, so men learned to present goals that could garner attention quickly and create momentum across those clocks.

This framing also created a selection effect. Those who engaged with RESTART already signalled a willingness to desist, and often voiced eagerness for help: "Make me your new project, please!" or "I need all of the support I can get!" Such expressions may have been transparent revelations, but they also aligned neatly with the rehabilitative script that RESTART itself demanded. All initial RESTART sessions required the men to sketch out their needs and clearly articulate their goals before support could be offered. Planning thus had a dual character: sincere for some, *required* for all. The very same traits of RESTART that offered men agency also narrowly defined how they could practice it.

Scholars often interpret the construction of goals and plans as evidence of intent to desist (Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Soyer, 2016). In this study, however, while planning might have been a sincere expression of hope, it was also explicitly required before support could begin. Within this frame, men's goals clustered around familiar domains: employment, education, therapy. King imagined bricklaying, Corey wanted college, Tyson asked about CBT[12]. These claims may represent genuine desires, but they also drew on the institutional vocabulary available in pre-release planning. They signalled legible, actionable, short-term goals; therefore their meaning cannot be fixed to one reading alone.

Employment was particularly illustrative of this tension. Although 86% of the sample named it as a goal in pre-release conversations, only 30% of prison-leavers nationally find work within six months of release (MoJ, 2023). Yet men voiced optimism in spite of these odds. Their belief in work as

[12] Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)

attainable may signal resilience, but it may also reveal how employment functions as the most visible, administratively legible indicator of progress within the institutional chronopolitics of release. Research in the UK shows that prison-leavers describe lawful employment not only as a practical step toward earning an income, but as a visible sign of identity change and legitimacy —a way to 'prove' transformation to oneself as well as probation, family and employers (Rhoden, Senker and Glorney, 2022; Atherton & Buck, 2021). It is the goal that travels fastest through institutional calendars and garners recognition the quickest.

Others grounded their motivation in a sense of responsibility to others. Literature describes this as 'responsible citizenship' (Leibrich, 1993). In practice, men voiced it through intimate obligations: "I owe it to my 4-year-old daughter not to miss another birthday" or "I can't stand to see my mum cry anymore." These could be read as heartfelt claims of duty, but they also, importantly, drew on recognised moral vocabularies — family duty, parenthood, citizenship — that made imagined futures socially legible to both self and others.

Finally, men were expected to not only set goals but to display belief in their attainability. Vaughan (2007) calls this 'perceived capability': the cognitive shift of imagining the kind of person one wants to be as possible and attainable. Yet this too was difficult to parse. Men had to present themselves as confident of change even when institutional constraints made such confidence fragile. Expressions such as "If I don't make something of myself now it'll never happen" were simultaneously hopeful and strategic: they gestured towards a prosocial future while also aligning with the expectations of resettlement support. In short, belief itself was part of the display.

Whether these motivational claims were deeply felt or strategically performed, the very act of voicing them synchronised men with RESTART's scaffolding. Signalling goals of employment, training, or family responsibility aligned with the categories, paperwork and decision windows of the institutional tempo, unlocking support in the short term. In this sense, motivation operated as less of

a stable inner quality than a conditional synchrony: a fragile alignment that appeared strong precisely because it resonated with the established rehabilitative script.

Over time, however, the distinction between belief and performance begins to collapse. Repeated articulations of readiness — "I'm ready to turn my life around," "this time is different" — take on a performative quality, shaping how men come to understand themselves. Even if initially voiced as pragmatic gestures to meet institutional expectations and secure support, these utterances sediment into self-narratives, altering what men imagine possible. In this way, the question of whether they 'really' believed it eventually ceases to matter. The discourse itself becomes consequential, producing momentum and structuring expectations regardless of its origins.

The chronopolitical tension emerges when these rehearsed or internalised aspirations collide with institutional delay. Men's own tempos of readiness — urgent, immediate, present-tense — rarely matched the slow rhythms of housing allocation, benefit approval, or probation decisions. What sounded like confident declarations of change before release could quickly unravel when institutional recognition lagged behind lived expectation. Here, the fragile synchrony of motivation was exposed as conditional and precarious: alignment in the moment, but vulnerable to later drift.

Keane's reflection captures this dynamic. Facing his second release, he insisted: "This time is different… I'm more motivated to stay out." Whether this conviction reflected genuine belief, strategic performance, or something in between, the distinction was less important than the act of saying it. In speaking it, Keane set a trajectory for himself, one that shaped how he, RESTART, and I understood his release. The utterance itself carried weight, producing its own momentum, however fragile, within the misaligned tempos of resettlement.

2.2.3 Out of Time

Even with the presence of a dedicated support worker and the co-creation of a release plan, uncertainty carried a psychological cost that RESTART could not alleviate. Pre-release waiting governed access to critical support and scaffolds (Sharma, 2014). Indeterminate prospects in areas such as housing or financial stability manifested as chronic stress, anxiety, and a diminished sense of agency (Evans & Kim, 2013). Fear clustered around clocks more than content: as fixed timepoints approached—release day, Approved Premises (AP)[13] allocation, the first probation report, benefit start dates—men worried not only about what would happen next but *when* and at what speed. The disorganisation of pre-release processes, combined with the remaining unknowns, left men with a persistent sense of instability: release was fast-approaching, and they felt late, out of step, and *out of time*. As deadlines converged, horizons compressed, exacerbating pre-existing mental health conditions that are already disproportionately high among prison populations (HMIP, 2019) and undercutting confidence in one's own preparations. Thus, whilst many of the men displayed signs of motivation and a strong desire to desist when developing their plans alongside RESTART, many of them still carried valid fears about their upcoming release. These anxieties reflect a form of projective agency under strain – men imagine future lives while recognising how fragile those futures could be under compressed time.

Moreover, reintegration was not only a matter of proving desistance to oneself, but of negotiating recognition within the community. Petersilia (2003) describes desistance as the process of reintegrating to one's community and restoring one's 'full citizenship'. Yet, as Meisenhelder (1982) reminds us, accepting conventional society is only half the battle; the other half is having conventional society accept you. Anxieties were therefore relational and timed**:** men feared breach by the next appointment, letting family down by a particular milestone, or failing to meet evaluative

[13] APs provide enhanced public protection and are used mainly for people assessed as high/very high risk of serious harm on licence after serious violence and/or sexual offences; they operate as a halfway house to support resettlement and community safety (HM Inspectorate of Probation 2021).

benchmarks on schedule. The fear was chronopolitical — not simply about failing in the abstract, but about failing to meet expectations and evaluations defined and *timed* by others: probation officers, family members, or institutional benchmarks of success.

This was particularly true as the release date drew nearer. Jake, who had been preparing for his release with RESTART for months, had a sudden and overwhelming fear in the week before his release: "Now that it's really here, I'm nervous, and I don't know if I want it. I don't know if I'm ready to leave here yet." As release day drew near and uncertainties remained unresolved, men often described not feeling "ready," wishing they could somehow "buy time" inside until challenges were resolved and 'unknowns' were reconciled — an impossible wish. The landscape of resettlement is fraught with insecurity and uncertainty, and no amount of 'extra' time inside would change this. In these moments, release felt less like opportunity than inevitability: men spoke of feeling "doomed" or "bound to end up back inside." Here projective agency faltered under temporal compression, imagined futures collapsed when they could not be made credible fast enough.

For men with prior release experience, anxieties crystallised around familiar obstacles: Callum, who had been in and out of prison before, was nervous about being housed in an Approved Premises (AP) because from experience he knew an environment "full of drugs and negative influences" would disrupt his imagined trajectory. He also recognised how AP rules and culture would obstruct his priority goal of finding work. Others voiced parallel concerns: strict licence conditions, unhelpful probation officers, the pressures of negative peers, or the fragility of financial stability — all challenges known from prior failures. Temporally, these challenges felt pending—inevitable and close. For men with prior releases, known obstacles hung over release as imminent traps: curfews, sign-ins and review dates liable to be activated at any moment after release, all the while critical scaffolds and supports stalled.

In addition to the anxiety surrounding known, anticipated threats, there was the anxiety about the unknown threats: the unpredictability of resettlement and the impossibility of predicting or fully

preparing for what lay ahead. Unlike men who knew of impending challenges– such as AP placement or denied employment – others grew anxious anticipating the unexpected challenges, events they could neither forecast nor sequence, but knew to expect. These men expressed concern about the gap between their imagined re-entry and the protective mechanisms in place to make it happen – a gap they'd hoped would close just in time for their release. When steps depended on cascading windows—ID before benefits, benefits before housing, housing before work—temporal scaffolding helped only if each piece arrived on time; one delay reverberated through the rest. As Warren's last-minute housing scramble showed, late decisions did not just stall logistics; they destabilised the very futures being rehearsed. These unknowns did not only represent material obstacles; they also unsettled self-narratives under construction, making imagined futures harder to inhabit. "Having my own place", "earning my own money", and "seeing my family" were ideals men recognised were not guaranteed as their release date drew closer.

Men recognised that, no matter how much effort they invested in planning and preparing alongside support workers, some critical aspects of release remained contingent on decisions made on delayed, unpredictable and inconsistent timelines— a reality experienced as discouraging and unsettling. Release offered a chance to start again, but it also offered the opportunity to fall back into old habits. In the days leading up to release, men often described the bodily signs of anticipatory stress – racing heart, sweaty palms, broken sleep – as the big day drew nearer and the sense of time running out intensified.

In the pre-release period, anxiety was fuelled by uncertainty, the pressure to meet expectations, and the fear of remaining unknowns, as horizons shrank and the release date drew near. Fear tracked calendars: men counted down the days and waited for timelines to align, as housing, benefits and licence decisions that would set their trajectories sat entirely outside their control. Where calendars aligned, anxiety eased; where windows slipped or decisions arrived too late, men anticipated being read as failing. As the day approached and unknowns failed to materialise in time, those who had once voiced ambitious plans began to voice doubt — not for lack of will but because time was

running out — leaving hope shadowed by apprehension and making clear that desistance was precarious from the very outset.

2.2.4 Left Waiting

> I got recalled on my tenth day in that place. I actually hadn't been told I was being released into an AP until a week before my release. So when I heard the news with one week remaining, I kind of sort of gave up. I just switched off and stopped being motivated. Then when I was out and at the AP and there were drugs everywhere, and I had already had a change in attitude, it didn't take long for me to get recalled.

What Douglas describes is not simply the influence of his accommodation; it is the sudden collapse of projective agency when goals and structures no longer align. The late notice of his AP placement meant the decision that set his trajectory landed too late to integrate, disrupting his imagined trajectory and leaving him resigned before he even left prison. His account captures the endpoint of a pattern traced across this chapter: where motivation first appeared strong and then gave way to fear, it could ultimately dissolve into resignation. He was *left waiting*: for answers that never arrived or arrived too late. He was not alone, as several others described abandoning hopes for resettlement before they even reached their release date.

In contrast to men who projected capability and optimism (Vaughan, 2007), others narrated the opposite: a perceived *in*capability of change. They described feeling "stuck" or "doomed," less anxious about the unknown than already resigned to the inevitability of impending failure. In pre-release meetings, this resignation was visible in the narrowing of goals. Men who felt resigned rarely, if ever, spoke of long-term goals or plans. They did not voice any ambitions beyond those rooted in immediate survival: a bed for the night, food, or in some cases, a drug score. When basic needs dominate attention, horizons foreshorten, futures narrow to the immediate and projective agency contracts.

For some, this resignation reflected feelings of hopelessness: they did not set long-term goals because they did not feel capable of meeting them. Nathan insisted there was no point looking for work or trying to fight his addiction if he was unhoused: “If I’m homeless, I’m recalled.” Mylo, struggling with serious mental health issues, dismissed the very idea of employment: *“*A job? Me?” Dario, facing addiction, felt unable to repair strained family ties: “My mum wants nothing to do with me when I’m like this.” In these cases, projective agency buckled under temporal compression: without temporal scaffolding in place – housing before work, benefits before rent – imagining a future self became simply implausible (Vaughan, 2007; Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002).

For others, resignation was shaped less by self-doubt than by anticipated misrecognition. These men did not necessarily doubt their own aspirations but withheld them, fearing they would be dismissed as unrealistic by probation officers, RESTART workers, or even myself as a researcher. Here the collapse of projective agency was not only inward but relational: futures were pre-emptively abandoned when men expected they would not be judged as legitimate in time.

Seen together, these accounts show that resignation was not always about a lack of motivation itself, but about judgments of credibility — their own and those of others. Indeed, if motivation could be strategically performed in earlier encounters, then the line between the “motivated” and the “resigned” may not be one of actual will, but of differing calculations about temporal plausibility: which futures could plausibly be claimed and recognised on schedule, and which could not.

And in fact, hopelessness and misrecognition could be mutually reinforcing, as men often internalised others’ evaluations of themselves as indicators of their perceived potential. Jamie, at 18 (the youngest in my cohort), captured this dynamic starkly: “If the people around me keep treating me like I am not enough, maybe I’m not enough for that lifestyle, maybe a life of crime is exactly what I am enough for.” His sense of failure grew from his own self-doubt coupled with others’ low expectations. Is it any wonder that, feeling this way, Jamie had abandoned the objective of successful resettlement weeks before his release: “There’s nothing for someone like me out there.” His words

show resignation forged through the internalisation of an anticipated evaluative gaze that would not recognise him in time.

In this way, resignation sits as the far side of fragile motivation. Where calendars aligned, some men rehearsed futures to fit institutional scripts and held momentum; where temporal misalignment persisted and scaffolding arrived late or not at all, others did not lose rehearsed futures, they pre-emptively abandoned them, convinced that recognition would not follow in time. Under conditions of persistent misalignment and structural insecurity, projective agency did not simply falter — sometimes, it was relinquished. Scott, who had been referred to RESTART by multiple concerned prison officers, told us rather proudly: "I guarantee I'll be back here by Christmas. I'd rather be here for Christmas than a tent." As for Phil, a 62-year-old man who had spent most of his life in prison:

> I've been arrested and sent here 9 times this year alone. The guards have bets on how long I'll stay out every time I'm released. I was close to having the record for shortest release, I missed it by 20 minutes.

He laughed and didn't seem to see the sadness in any of it. "But honestly, I'd rather be in here," he concluded — a man left waiting, not in defeat but in sober acceptance of the limits that now defined his imagined future.

2.3 CONCLUSION

As the day of release drew near, the chapter showed how practical tasks and emotional rehearsal intertwined under conditions of scarcity and compressed time. The pre-release period was not merely a checklist of forms and appointments but a site where men actively weighed up who they might become, against the backdrop of a system that can both enable and obstruct those efforts. Across The Plan (2.1.1), The Action (2.1.2) and The Unknowns (2.1.3), projective agency was rehearsed in short horizons, waiting governed access, and institutional clocks set the pace at which futures could be made credible.

In the weeks leading up to release, men's tentative identities were shaped not only by ambition and perceived capability but by temporal discipline and chronopolitical expectations of what goals were achievable and on what timeline – sometimes inadvertently reinforced by RESTART and by the research encounter itself. Early conversations were not neutral disclosures but negotiated performances calibrated to secure scarce time: Securing Scarce Time (2.2.1) showed how need was performed to convert attention into allocated casework; Signalling Readiness, Forcing Momentum (2.2.2) showed how motivation had to be voiced in the present tense and mapped to administratively legible, near-term goals; in both, planning operated as gatekeeping, offering agency in form while constraining its substance. What came into view was misalignment in its earliest form: men's hopes were continually set against the timed criteria of probation, councils and family expectations, and had to travel through those clocks to be recognised.

As deadlines converged, Out of Time (2.2.3) traced how fear clustered around calendars rather than content: men counted down the days whilst awaiting answers that did not arrive. As horizons shrank and the countdown to release was nearly up, men reported feeling 'not ready yet'. Where windows aligned, anxiety eased and short bursts of momentum were possible; where decisions landed late or not at all, momentum stalled. Left Waiting (2.2.4) then showed the endpoint: when scaffolding decisions failed to materialise in time, futures did not simply fail – they were relinquished. Resignation appeared as an effect of misaligned clocks, not the absence of desire to change, and it narrowed goals to immediate survival as projective agency contracted. Across the chapter, men ranged along a continuum from fragile alignment to pre-emptive abandonment, sorted less by will than by whose schedules could be met.

These early misalignments were a beginning, not an end. They compound in the community as scaffolds expire, decisions defer and evaluative standards diverge, producing emotional, motivational and recognitional drift that the thesis tracks across later chapters and revisits at month 18. Taken together, the contours mapped here set the stage for the liminal gate in Chapter 3, where temporal

compression intensifies, support flips easily into surveillance and the politics of timing becomes the immediate condition under which desistance must begin.

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In the quiet, cold air, perched under the bus shelter, I stand watching the gate and waiting. 9:06 a.m. Apart from me, two grounds workers by the far end of the parking lot, and one taxi parked out in front of the gate, there is no one else in sight. Across the estate there is a biting silence, you can hear someone clear their throat across the opposite side of the estate.

The space feels private, intimate almost. I feel as though I've been let in on a little secret that the rest of the world hasn't: In this quiet parking lot, amidst the English countryside, as the world carries on with its day, dozens of men walk out that unassuming gate, making a vow never to return, to turn their lives around. Am I the only one who hears it?

(Fieldnotes, Pos. 3501)

3INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we zoom in on the first twenty-four hours of release, breaking down each significant moment in turn – the prison gate, the drive to probation, the initial probation meeting, and the remaining responsibilities of the day. After months or years of preparation and anticipation, the moment of release arrives for all 150 men in the cohort. Release, much like imprisonment, can be harsh and inconsiderate: one's release is unforgivingly punctual, arriving regardless of how long one has been wanting it and whether one feels ready or not. It meets men who are anxious or excited, determined or hopeless, supported or alone, and sends them out all the same.

For men leaving Bullingdon, this transition was not experienced as liberation but as a sudden change of pace. Inside, time had been slow, suspended, and uncertain. Days were structured around waiting — for visits, letters, decisions or release dates that could shift without warning. Stepping through the gate ruptured this suspension and accelerated them into the tempo of supervised resettlement and the expectations that came with it. Almost immediately, men were required to present at probation within hours, travel across the county to housing offices, make claims for benefits, secure identification and register with health services. Each step was time-sensitive and missing one risked sanction or recall: temporal compression reducing the day to deadlines.

This acceleration produced a form of temporal whiplash. What had been a passive endurance of institutional time became, overnight, an expected compliance with bureaucratic time. Progress was defined not by effort or intent but by how quickly men could meet the externally imposed benchmarks of resettlement – benchmarks that arrived almost immediately. The burden was not just practical but existential: release demanded that they perform change at a pace set by others, as probation exercised power through speed (dromology), and the new institutional tempo quickly outstripped men's lived capacities. This analysis extends earlier work on liminality and transition, which highlights release as a fragile passage between institutional control and a surveilled form of freedom (Turner, 1969; Crewe, 2016), and resonates with

scholarship emphasising how such phases concentrate identity work, hope, and structural constraint (Giordano et al., 2002; Farrall, 2019).

The chapter is structured as follows: The descriptive section presents four moments that illustrate how institutional and lived tempos collided: The Gate (3.1.1), where men felt already late and out of step; The Car (3.1.2), a suspended interval of possibility; Probation (3.1.3), where the fast and unforgiving tempo of surveillance was set; and The To-Do List (3.1.4), a cascade of time-sensitive responsibilities that few could realistically keep up with. Each vignette traces patterned ways of encountering day one – with or without escorts, with or without transport, and with varying degrees of institutional support – and reveals how fragile progress became when men were compelled to match the accelerated rhythm of supervision.

The discussion section then takes up three themes: Setting the Supervised Tempo (3.2.1**)** shows how probation and recall impose a surveilled tempo, exercising power through speed (dromology) and calibrating compliance by calendars (temporal discipline); Deadlines and Delays (3.2.2) shows how immediate structural constraints create bottlenecks and delays that ration access, once again exposing men to waiting as a form of governance; and Outpaced (3.2.3) shows how men describe feeling "set up to fail" when timetabled demands outpace lived capacities, producing chronopolitical misalignment that turns 'support' into timed checkpoints.

Together, these accounts show that release is not a single moment of freedom but a crucible: a compressed twenty-four-hour space in which, for a brief moment, anything feels possible, but every possibility must be rapidly negotiated and justified. It is here, in the shock of tempo, that the fragility of progress is first exposed as misaligned clocks turn support into checkpoints and make early compliance feel scripted by calendars rather than intent.

3.1 DESCRIPTION

The following section presents four moments that capture how release unfolded across the first day, each marked by a distinct relationship to time. At The Gate (3.1.1), men stepped from institutional suspension into lived time only to feel they were already late, entering the world on a misstep and out of rhythm. The Car (3.1.2) offered a fleeting suspension where, for a moment, anything seemed possible — a quiet interval in which possibilities reopened, as men revisited goals and rehearsed futures, protected from the pace being set outside. Probation (3.1.3) imposed the opposite: a tightly surveilled tempo where expectations were fast, unforgiving, and left no room for error. Finally, The To-Do List (3.1.4) condensed the pressures of resettlement into a cascade of deadlines and appointments, creating a double burden of time as men raced between tasks whilst being forced to wait for what felt like stalled progress. Together, these vignettes show how the very first hours of freedom revealed progress to be fragile, shaped less by motivation than by the demand to keep pace with supervision's accelerated timetable.

3.1.1 The Gate

The prison estate, while large, was quiet, still and unassuming in the mornings. If you arrived early enough you might see the changeover from the night shift officers to the morning ones. If you arrived after 8 a.m., you would find a car park full of parked cars but void of any life or activity for the next twelve hours. Time was baked into the landscape: shift handovers, roll checks, and gate openings, all punctuated by long intervals of quiet waiting and stillness.

The quiet was something that struck me almost immediately. The first few moments of freedom were not loud, exciting, or attractive, as one might expect; rather, freedom began silently, softly, and almost secretly. The silence was largely due to the prison's isolation. His Majesty's Prison Bullingdon is a local, Category B prison, located in the countryside between surrounding villages Ambrosden, Lower Arncott, Upper

Arncott, Blackthorn and Piddington. Like many local prisons in England, it is intentionally removed from busy city centres and suburbs and instead is surrounded only by quiet countryside and undeveloped fields (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Aerial photograph of HMP Bullingdon. *Source: M Prison, Bullingdon [Photograph], by M J Richardson, n.d., Geograph. (https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/3640850). CC BY-SA 2.0.*

The closest city with a train and a bus station, Bicester, was a two-hour walk away. Without a car, one had to rely on two, sometimes three, buses to reach the nearest city; the bus that ran between Bicester and the prison ran every two hours and not at all between the hours of 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. The prison was out of reach and out of touch from the timetables and routines of nearby cities. Distance stretched as time contracted: release began on a timetable not of one's own making.

The gate itself was impressively large: more than 20 feet wide and over 12 feet tall. While overpowering in size and structure, much like the rest of the estate from the outside, it was very benign. Stripped of all contextual power and meaning, the metal gate itself held no inherent significance. Nevertheless, in its context, the prison gate carried immense symbolic importance to the men who passed through it, as it evoked an individual's past, present and future all at once. It was the first point of entry upon incarceration and the first point of exit when one has served their time. It was the gate itself that distinguished between 'prisoner' and 'free', depending on the direction you walked through it – the metal gate as the keeper of time and arbiter of progress.

Suddenly, the silence would break with the crashing of metal gates and voices from the distance – you could hear the release before you could see it. A few words, maybe laughter, would break the silence that seemed to spread across the entire car park. And a moment or two later, out would come the men in their baggy grey tracksuits.

The number of releases could range anywhere from 1 to 20, and the timing of releases varied considerably, the men's release was set by penal timetables and not the men's own readiness or intent. Men's release times were at the whims of prison delays and staff shortages, meaning releases were unpredictable, inconsistent, and often overdue. Freedom itself was running late. Some days the men came out staggered, one every 15 or 30 minutes. While other days, they would all come out at the same time in one big group.

"Are you lot waiting for Oxford?" One of the men, approaching the bus stop, would ask.

"No, but the Oxford bus isn't due for another two hours," I'd tell him, and I'd show him the bus schedule – a schedule I knew all too well from experience. The bus arrived at the prison at 8:55 a.m., 10:55 a.m., and 12:55 p.m., and the men were usually released between 10:00 a.m. and 12 noon. The clocks rarely aligned: men were regularly released in the long stretch between buses and were forced to save their momentum for later, stalled in the quiet car park while the tempo of nearby towns and cities carried on without them.

Urgency hung in the air, as men were suspended in time: Many of the men became visibly anxious keeping track of the time they were "losing" waiting for the bus. If they could get their hands on a lighter, many would smoke to calm the stress – their first cigarettes in months, maybe years – the fumes combined with the stress making them lightheaded. Some of the men would recount to me how long their journey to probation would be and how inconveniently early their probation meeting was scheduled. "Do you think I'll make it?" They'd ask. Others would pass the time counting up their discharge grant[14] to the last coin, and then ask: "Hey miss, how much is a train to Reading these days?" Some men, getting impatient waiting

[14] On release, eligible sentenced prisoners receive a small cash payment (formerly the *discharge grant*, now the *subsistence payment*) and travel tickets to bridge the gap until benefits; it's generally payable only after 14+ days in custody and not to remand prisoners (HMPPS, PSI 72/2011).

for the bus to arrive, set off to Bicester on foot — a two-hour walk along dirt roads; others borrowed my phone to call taxis frantically, only to cancel when told the wait would be an hour or the fare too high.

Inevitably, someone who had experience making the same journey before would offer their wisdom: "There's no chance you're making it to Slough by 12 noon. No chance. Your fate lies in whether your probation officer is in a good mood today or not." This would produce some hollow laughter across the group. "And you" he'd point at the man with the coins, "you're lucky you got one of them, I'm on a recall so get released with nothing." Most, finally, had no choice but to sit and wait. The day's tempo was set elsewhere; progress stalled before it even began.

And then, inevitably, came the moment I was waiting for. Out would come a man that I recognised, and who recognised me. There could have been a number of asterisks beside his name on a paper, entire conversations had about him at probation and resettlement meetings, or a 'red' indicator of risk generated by some algorithm on some offending manager's screen. He might be a 'problem case' a 'prolific re-offender', an 'addict' or 'user', a 'career criminal' or just plain 'hopeless'. But today he was none of those things. Today he was a man, standing in a car park, scanning desperately across the parked cars hoping to spot me, waving, waiting for him. Today he came with no 'risk assessments' 'scores' or 'warnings', he came with only two things: a plastic bag of his 'belongings' – a prison ID card and some clothes – gripped tightly in his hand, and the hope that this could be the last time he has to walk through those gates again.

Ty was released just after 10:30 a.m. He was later than all the others and when he approached his RESTART worker and I, the first frantic words out of his mouth were: "They made me come out later because the Governor forgot to sign my paper." He was nervous. "Am I the last one out?" he kept asking. "How can I be late to my own release!" His voice was fast and movements frantic. He knew timing mattered: he was not only racing the clocks but racing everyone else released that morning, as they were all bound to end up in the same queues – homelessness presentations, council housing desks, AP receptions, banks, pharmacies –, and the difference between second or third in queue could be the difference between a bed or the concrete for his first night's sleep. His RESTART worker had to reassure him several times that because we would

be driving, the slight delay this morning wouldn't hold him back at all: "You'll be on time for probation, not to worry," they would say.

He took a dramatic sigh out. "I'm free!" He called out, to anybody listening. In this case it was just myself, his RESTART worker, the handful of men waiting by the bus stop, and the two grounds staff working on something nearby. We walked over to the RESTART worker's car, and he tossed his belongings into the car boot, but took his prison papers with him to his seat.

"Do you do this every day?" he asked once we'd all gotten in the car.

"I don't but Helen does" his RESTART worker answered.

"Does it work then?" He asked. And his question struck me, as I'd never had anyone ask me that before and I didn't really have a definitive answer. Maybe it was a combination of the shared space, the trust, or his nerves surrounding the day, he clarified his question: "Am I going to be okay?" he asked me.

The gate marked the first temporal disjuncture of release. Men left the suspended time of custody only to find themselves already late, already behind, and already out of rhythm with the outside world. Men's release was ruled by inconsistent clocks, misaligned buses and decisions arriving on other people's schedules. Freedom began not with a clean break, but with the sense of being out of step from the very first moment.

3.1.2 The Car

The car ride was an intermission — a brief, protected capsule between the gate and probation, in which the outside pace and its expectations were temporarily paused. That morning, I shared a car with TJ and Sid, and their RESTART worker. Despite one man being 15 years older and having served a handful more sentences than the other, life had led TJ & Sid to the same realisation: "I am destined for something better than this. This is not the life I was meant to live." Both men got released that morning and hopped into my

car with the same smile on their face, positive disposition, and promise to themselves that they would not return. “Didn’t I say the sun would be shining for us, Sid?” TJ smiled at his older companion, as we drove away from the prison gates towards their hometown of Aylesbury. The men used the short time to reconcile their past, present and rehearsed futures, making sense of their own timelines and trajectories:

TJ said he had been in prison once before, for three years, but that was when he had just turned 18 and was on a “totally different path”. This time was different. Just six months – “it felt like a timeout”. “This time I’m getting my life together, because this time it’s for my son. He’s three years old,” he told us.

“For me”, Sid joined, “this time is also very different. Last time I came out my mum and partner had both passed away while I was inside, so all I wanted to do was get high and go up to the sky. But I’ve had time to grieve, now I want to give back my time to the community.” I believed them both. And what’s more important, they looked like they believed themselves.

The car served as a safe space, a ‘protective capsule’ as some researchers call it (Barker, 2003:137; Sibley, 1995:136), insulating men from the outside world and its expectations. After all, when the men were at their most vulnerable, the car was there, waiting to pick them up**.** In the long list of ‘unknowns’ men were being released into, they could rest assured a RESTART car would be parked, waiting for them, when they walked through the gate. Moreover, on a day defined by acceleration — where men felt perpetually out of step — the car journey offered an imposed pause: for a brief stretch, between the gate and probation, minutes were no longer rationed, and there was nothing else to do and nowhere else they needed to be.

The informal environment of the car meant the men were less preoccupied with giving the ‘right’ answers, as they often were in formal, seated interviews (Evans and Jones, 2011). Instead, conversations unfold more naturally — shaped by movement, proximity, and the brief suspension of outside demands. Ben, for example, spent the entirety of the car ride calling up old friends with the new working SIM card his RESTART worker had just given him. He would dial the number, smiling widely, then when they answered he would say: “Hi [insert friend’s name]” animatedly, and wait for them to recognize his voice. “Ben?! Is

that you?!" they'd all say, followed by a "You cheeky bastard," or a "My boy is out!", and he'd in turn smile doubly wide. "Listen mate, I've gotta go, I've gotta go" he'd cut the conversations short, hanging up quickly so he could dial the next number. He repeated this with nearly every contact on his phone. The car was beaming with positivity, cheers, and laughter – I couldn't help but notice I had started smiling just listening to all of it.

I recall, too, conversations about family members, disclosing of secrets, expressions of raw and unfiltered emotions, thick descriptions of hopes and dreams; in the car nothing felt too out of reach. "You are from Canada?" Aakesh beamed. "I had an uncle move to Canada. O--, Ot-- Oshawa or Ottawa, I can't remember now." He smiled to himself: "I always wished I'd gone with him. Can you imagine? Me? Canada?" He paused and we stared out the window for a few moments, imagining. He spoke again: "Yeah, I bet things would've been different for me if I had gone to Canada." "It's never too late." I pointed out. "Canada isn't going anywhere." "Yeah." He said, in a way that I could tell he was picturing himself there, his life there, a job, a place to call home, maybe even a family, a future. For a moment, he let himself stay there, and then—"I've got this licence that means I can't leave unfortunately." Reality hit. But for a moment, there was a promise of Canada.

On more than one occasion the men would direct the conversation towards pain, trauma, or grief. Inside, scarce attention and short appointment windows trained men to compress their stories: to keep disclosures brief, to time them to five-minute slots, or to withhold them when the queue was moving. Staff caseloads and tight timetables meant that even when men were seen, talk was paced by the clock. In the car, by contrast, the clock slackened; with a captive audience and no queue behind them, men expanded what was usually kept short — and sometimes said what had never been said. Riley shared the grief of his father's passing:

> My father died from Covid, actually. He was a new immigrant to this country, worked as a taxi driver. We told him not to go out and take customers during Covid, but he did anyways. He was like that, my father. Very stubborn. So he caught covid from one of his customers and died from it. I couldn't even go see him in hospital because of covid regulations. I had to Facetime him. I had to watch him die over Facetime.

He paused and let out a single, uncomfortable chuckle: “The saddest part,” he said, “I was in jail by the time they had the funeral. I went to my own father’s funeral, handcuffed and escorted by two officers.” Vince told us he was diagnosed with cancer last year in prison and never told anyone. “I never had anyone to tell,” he said.

The car seemed to be the sole space on release day where freedom was felt in entirety, with all challenges that inevitably arise during resettlement being temporarily stalled. In the safety of the car, riding the high of newfound freedom, the men were safe to dream, to plan, to hope, because for that moment – before they arrived in their locality or at probation – the car shielded men from the relentless tempo of supervision where minutes were scarce and any slip could carry consequence. Between the prison and their locality, the car journey acted as a beautiful space of limbo: of optimism and ambition. Nothing had yet happened, so anything was possible.

Beyond comfort and safety, the car journey symbolised much more than just transport: it represented a man’s journey from behind bars to his local community. In every car ride from the prison gates to a man’s neighborhood, I bore witness to the start of a new journey – one that intertwined the man’s past, present, and future at once – as though I was sharing a car with all versions of himself. In the back seat, as we drove into Reading, Rahaj stared out at the familiar streets of his childhood, and began to cry.

> It hurts me to see my streets. I see my dreams here. I see my father teaching me how to ride my first bicycle here. I see my favourite shop to buy sweets there. I thought I was going to study and be a doctor and work here [he points]. And here is where I thought I’d buy my first house, this street, it was always the prettiest. I think of all the dreams I had, all the hope. And now it just hurts to look.

As Rahaj’s sentiment shows, the car was only able to protect the men for so long before they were inevitably faced with reminders of their past and the obstacles in their present. As we turned off the motorways and into men’s local streets, hopes and ambitions became more and more bounded. Nowhere was this truer than the car journey’s destination: probation, where the pause had ended and the clock officially resumed.

The car therefore marked a suspended interval of release — a temporary capsule of time where optimism, memory, and ambition could surface, and where men could imagine futures not yet foreclosed. For that

brief stretch of road, anything felt possible. Yet this suspension was fragile: the car was always moving them forward, carrying them inexorably toward probation, where institutional tempo would once again take over. In that sense, the journey itself became a journey through time: from suspended possibility into accelerated obligation.

3.1.3 Probation

Probation was the site where men were first introduced to the chronopolitical rhythm of supervised resettlement: the probation officer laid out what progress was expected of men and at what tempo it was to be demonstrated. The probation induction appointment was itself the first of many imposed deadlines, as attendance was a licence condition, and lateness or absence could be punished with recall. The pace was quick and unforgiving: offering little room for misstep or clarification and abandoning or punishing those who could not keep up.

Ron's RESTART worker and I sat with him and his probation officer (PO) as they ran through the induction forms.[15] The structure of the first probation meeting was an induction: a chance for the men to meet their probation officers, learn the terms and conditions of their licence, and complete a 'risk of reoffending' self-assessment. Through routine probation meetings and check-ins, men's resettlement was being monitored to ensure that they were following licence conditions and 'staying out of trouble'. For those six, twelve or twenty-four months on licence, probation officers set and scored the timetable of compliance, treating punctuality, paperwork and brief check-ins as evidence of progress or risk. That arbitration began at the first meeting, on a tight timetable that left little room for explanation or delay.

After reading the terms and conditions of the licence and signing the probation contract – signifying an agreement between the PO and prison-leaver – the two move on to the self-assessment questionnaire,

[15] While not always, if the men consented and the Probation Officer was alright with it, I would sit in on probation meetings whenever the chance arose.

entitled: ‘Are any of these going to be a problem for you?’ As his probation officer read through a long list, Ron was required to reflect whether ‘*any of these are going to be a problem for him*’, responding only ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.

His probation officer starts: “Finding a good place to live?”

Yes

“Mixing with bad company?”

Yes

“Being Bored?”

Yes

“Being Lonely?”

Yes

“Going to places which cause me trouble?”

Yes

“Taking drugs?”

Yes

“Drinking too much alcohol?”

Yes

“Losing my Temper?”

After 26 out of 27 ‘Yeses’ – the only ‘No’ being ‘Getting on with my husband/wife/partner’ as Ron didn’t have one – we moved on to the final question: ‘Do you think you are likely to offend in the future?’ Here Ron could choose from ‘Definitely not’, ‘Unlikely’, ‘Quite likely’ and ‘Very likely’.

*"*Definitely," Ron answered confidently.

"Definitely? Or definitely not?" the PO clarified.

"Definitely", he said, unmoving.

"And why is that?" They asked.

"I've got no income. Nothing more to say than that really."

The exercise compressed complex realities into binary choices, producing an immediate judgement of risk and readiness. The tempo was fast, the categories rigid, leaving little space for explanation beyond the ticked box. This was power-through-speed in practice: the timetable dictated how much could be said, how quickly, and in what form. And as it turned out, Ron was not the only man in my sample to answer "Yes, a majority of these are going to be a problem for me*"* and *"*I am very likely to offend in the future*."*

When the PO moved on to the Diversity and Inclusion form and, in a similar tick-box Yes/No exercise, asked about disabilities, lasting mental health conditions (twelve months or more), and neurodiversity conditions, Ron was reporting 'Yes' to multiple co-occurring conditions. The pace did not slow; the form advanced, the clock moved, and men's complexities were flattened to keep to tempo.

Probation was also where men released with no fixed abode (NFA)[16] learned updates about their housing situations. For the higher-risk men, this is where they would learn if they would be required to live in an Approved Premises (AP) as a condition of their licence. For others, they discovered whether they had successfully received an offer for supported accommodation. Applications for council housing or other supported accommodation had been made by either RESTART, probation officers, or the prison resettlement team before men were released, but the verdict was often only relayed at their first probation meeting out in the community. Practically, this meant that men had no idea whether they would be housed

[16] Formal term for someone released from prison homeless

or not coming out of prison. As a result, perhaps the biggest 'unknown' men had been waiting for became 'known' just after release, when options had already narrowed and there was little left to be done.

86% of the men in my sample were released NFA and awaited news from probation[17]. And for over half of those men, despite the efforts of their probation officer and RESTART worker, they would learn that housing prospects had been unsuccessful and there was nowhere for them to stay. This was the case for Ron. Ron had been released from prison 14 times in the last 10 years and had been released homeless every time. His PO would then return to the Induction form and select which of the following Accommodation Statuses best suited Ron (see Figure 8). They settled on 'Homeless – Squat' because Ron said he "knew a place" "under a bridge". Those men with a history of homelessness, like Ron, knew how devastating it could – and would – be to their desistance, and were therefore able to candidly answer the PO's Self-Assessment questionnaire accordingly.

ACCOMODATION STATUS	
Approved Premises	☐
BASS accom 13 weeks or more	☐
BASS accom less than 13 weeks	☐
CAS3	☐
Friends / Family (settled)	☐
Friends / Family (transient)	☐
HOIE Section 10	☐
HOIE Section 04	☐
Homeless - Rough Sleeping	☐
Homeless – Squat	☐
Homeless – shelter/emergency hostel/ campsite	☐
Householder (owner-freehold or leasehold)	☐
Immigration Detention	☐
Long Term Residential Healthcare	☐
Rental Accom - private rental	☐
Rental Accom - social rental from LA	☐
Supported Housing	☐

Figure 8: HMPPS Probation Induction Intake Form: Accommodation Status section.
Source: Author fieldnotes / Probation Service materials, 2022.

[17] A more thorough discussion of the impact of precarious housing is developed in Chapter 4

I recall sharing a room with Peter, who spoke very little English, his RESTART worker and his PO. I was called in that morning to translate, as we shared a first language: Polish. Because of this, the biting words *"you have not been successful with housing this time"* – implying he had been or will be another time – had to come from my mouth. His PO continued: *"*Based on my notes, it says here you have a drinking problem? Your previous arrest is largely linked to alcohol consumption?" I translated. "That's correct." Peter answered and I repeated. He had already answered 'Yes' with a resounding nod to whether alcohol would be a problem for him, when we'd gone through translating the self-questionnaire.

"We really need you to address your drinking problem Peter, it's incredibly challenging for us to move forward with you if your drinking gets in the way every time. How likely are you to drink this evening?"

"100%." I translated.

"So you already know you will drink?"

"I know I have a drinking problem. But I can guarantee that tonight at midnight, when I am lying on the street unable to fall asleep, I will reach for the bottle and drink until I can't feel the concrete underneath me. If you were lying there with me, you would have a drinking problem too."

The room fell silent. With Peter's fate somewhat decided by the fact that he'd be homeless, I had nothing else to translate. Here too, time was the unforgiving variable: the probation timetable demanded quick fixes to problems that were in fact enduring, slow, and structural. Peter's admission underscored the mismatch between lived temporalities of survival and the accelerated tempo of compliance expected by probation.

Probation therefore set the first unforgiving tempo of supervision. From the moment men arrived, the meeting was clock-bound: any lateness risked recall, complex life histories were flattened for expediency, every answer was measured efficiently, and progress was immediately benchmarked against licence conditions. In that dromological frame – power exercised through pace-setting – the tempo collapsed the

slow, suspended time of custody into an accelerated schedule of surveillance and obligation, compressing nuance into tick-box categories and leaving little room for hesitation or gradual adjustment.

3.1.4 The To-Do List

If probation set the timetable, the rest of the day supplied the checkpoints. Men left the probation office with a list that felt both urgent and unfinished: present at housing, register at the GP, attend the jobcentre, activate a bank account, chase ID, collect a prescription, phone social services, call CAS-3 back by 4 p.m. Each item was time-sensitive; most depended on another that had not yet arrived. This was the double burden of time in practice: racing between appointments while still waiting for the very prerequisites of compliance.

The first day of release was busy by design. Consider a typical sequence: A man leaves probation at 11:15 a.m. with an instruction to open a bank account and attend the jobcentre that afternoon. The bank requires photographic ID and proof of address. He has neither: his only document is a release paper and an NFA status. The GP can help verify identity, but the practice asks for proof of address to register him. The council can issue a letter, but only after he queues at the housing desk and completes a form he cannot access without data on his phone. He walks across town because he has spent the last of his discharge money on the bus to probation. By 2:30 p.m. he has reached the council office, taken a ticket, and started to wait.

By late afternoon the list often looked longer, not shorter. Tasks had multiplied into sub-tasks — call back tomorrow, bring a letter, get a signature, return with ID — and each spawned a new deadline. The day ended not with completion but with a stack of slips and instructions to try again. Men spoke of feeling they had worked all day and yet fallen behind. The double burden of time captured that paradox: the faster they moved, the more they waited; the more they waited, the faster they had to move when a window finally opened.

The speed and sequencing of these tasks created a bureaucratic race. And the rhythm was stop–start: sprint, queue, sprint, queue. Where a window opens — a helpful receptionist, a same-day slot, a worker willing to phone ahead — momentum appears. Where it closes — lunch breaks, "computer says no", missing referrals — the day congeals. Men learned to triage on the move, continually re-sequencing tasks to catch whatever could be done before offices shut. The effect was cumulative. Even small delays — a bus every 30 minutes, a lunch closure from 12:30 to 1:30 — could push the rest of the list out of reach. The race was not only against the number of tasks but also against the clock itself: if housing, benefits or prescriptions were not secured before offices closed at 5 p.m., men risked spending their first night out on the street, sometimes without essential medications.

RESTART aimed to ease the daunting burden of release by providing workers who could accompany men through their first-day tasks. With so much to complete before offices and shops closed, simply having transport from the prison and between appointments was a decisive advantage. For most of the men I shadowed, without RESTART they would not even have known — let alone attempted — the complex tasks expected on their first day. Many, whether through long sentences, lack of experience or learning difficulties, had no idea how to open a bank account, apply for Universal Credit, or seek help if homeless. The system assumed knowledge they simply did not have, compounding the feeling that men were already out of step from the moment of release.

"If we hadn't shown up today, what would today have looked like for you?" His RESTART worker asked Karl, curiously.

Karl chuckled and answered candidly:

> Honestly I'da just winged it. I probably would've just winged it, yeah. I mean I'd come out [city] and maybe I would've contacted Citizen's Advice Bureau? I don't know if they're even running still. I would've tried to get my flat back, but if that didn't work, I probably would have to pitch up a tent somewhere or just go back in there [prison].

Karl's response captured the temporal mismatch: men were expected to navigate the shift from the slow, heavily regulated tempo of prison to the rapid expectations and complex bureaucracies of the outside world immediately, even though they had neither the resources nor the knowledge to keep pace.

Unfortunately, even with RESTART's presence and support, the first day of release was strewn with obstacles. Discovering that one was homeless was just one of ultimately many trials men did face upon release. Another common setback was finances. As of August 2023, HMPPS policy entitled prison-leavers to a subsistence payment of approximately £89.52 upon release — colloquially referred to as the 'discharge grant' (HMPPS, 2023). Eligibility, however, varied by probation location and sentence length. For example, those released from remand or serving sentences of fewer than 14 days were excluded from receiving the grant, despite undertaking the same journey to probation and confronting many of the same post-release challenges (ibid). As a result, men often left custody with only minimal cash in hand and, in most cases, without any further funds waiting for them on the outside.

Even those with established Universal Credit claims prior to arrest typically found their benefits suspended during custody and were required to reapply upon release. This process was neither straightforward nor swift: for some in my sample it took up to 6-8 weeks and demanded prerequisites such as a valid email address, mobile phone number, fixed home address, and active bank account. Unfortunately, most men leaving prison lacked one or more of these requirements, further delaying access to payments. The process, too, was severely inaccessible for those who were neurodiverse or living with learning difficulties, amplifying the barriers to securing even minimal financial support.

Of all the men I shadowed on their release day, nearly all required a visit to the jobcentre, as the majority either intended to claim or had previously received benefits. These encounters varied considerably: for some, the process stretched over several hours, while others were turned away almost immediately and instructed to rebook for a later appointment.

I recall an experience with a man in my sample who had severe learning disabilities. Hector grew increasingly frustrated as the GOV.UK webpage kept prompting him to input a username and password for his existing account. “My stupid head can’t remember stuff like that” he would yell getting increasingly frustrated. The difficulty was unsurprising: the password had likely been created years earlier, as the system does not permit multiple accounts per individual. And unlike myself or the RESTART worker, Hector had little experience managing digital credentials, having spent most of his life without a phone and never owning a computer. Even the ‘forgot my password’ function proved inaccessible, as it required confirmation via email. Hector, newly equipped with a basic flip phone provided by a local charity, had no means of accessing an email account.

Here, too, the tempo was unforgiving. The system demanded instant recall of digital credentials and an ability to keep up with a rapid tempo, while Hector’s lived reality was slow, fragmented, and precarious. After exhausting every option, we were eventually locked out of the system for 25 minutes. Hector attempted to defend himself, explaining that he usually wrote important details on scraps of paper which he tucked into his flip phone’s sleeve, but these were often misplaced. It was unsurprising that Hector misplaced those papers: a man sleeping rough, carrying only a Tesco bag with his prison licence and a few belongings – but no phone charger – could hardly be expected to safeguard an old scrap of paper containing log-in details from years earlier. What was surprising, however, was that the Department for Work and Pensions appeared not to anticipate such realities, nor to design a system that could accommodate them. In practice, the process was profoundly inaccessible to the very group it was intended to support.

And given that employment upon release is exceptionally rare for prison leavers (Rovira, 2024; Pager, 2003; Beckett & Western, 1999, Nagin & Waldfogel, 1995) – and almost unheard of immediately after release – most prison-leavers rely on benefits or charities to meet their basic needs, at least until they’ve found a steady income. So, when those avenues fail, it is not surprising so many of the men turn toward crime as a means of survival.

Hector himself had been arrested last time for shoplifting just three days before his first Universal Credit payment was due:

> I had set up my claim and was so close to receiving my money, so I said 'please don't put me in jail, just give me a chance to stay out and get my money. Just give me a chance'. But they sent me back to prison, and now I've lost my claim again and I need to start from scratch.

"If successful, the payment may take 6-8 weeks to appear in your bank account." The employee at the Job Centre announced. We all nodded, but between myself, the employee, the RESTART worker and Hector, I got the feeling none of us felt confident Hector would ever see that payment.

The first day to-do list was not only administrative but chronopolitical. It made the terms of early progress visible: success was counted in timetabled steps that required speed, transport, documents and stable contact details. Any missing piece slowed the whole chain. The day's outcome hinged less on intent than on whether those pieces arrived in time. The first day of release was thus not a gradual re-entry but an accelerated timetable of obligations. Probation set the pace, and every subsequent task reinforced it. For men like Hector or Karl, the day quickly became a temporal whiplash — a shift from suspended institutional time to a cascade of deadlines they could not possibly meet. By nightfall, the tempo of release had already outpaced them.

3.2 DISCUSSION

Building on the preceding vignettes, this section turns from description to analysis. The accounts of the gate, the car, probation, and the to-do list reveal a common thread: men were compelled to shift rapidly from suspended institutional time to the accelerated demands of supervision and resettlement. What appeared, moment by moment, as minor logistical hurdles — a delayed bus, relentless tick-box forms at probation, a forgotten password at the jobcentre — accumulated into a broader sense of being already late, already behind, and perpetually out of rhythm with the demands of the outside world.

The analysis proceeds in three parts. Setting the Supervised Tempo (3.2.1**)** shows how probation and the threat of recall impose a surveilled tempo, exercising power through speed (a dromological frame) and temporal discipline, so that punctuality and paperwork stand in for intent. Deadlines and Delays (3.2.2**)** shows how immediate structural constraints — housing, ID, benefits, transport, medication — create temporal bottlenecks that ration access and expose men to waiting as governance, with progress dependent on windows and queues they do not control. Outpaced (3.2.3) shows how, when timetabled demands outpace lived capacities, men describe feeling "set up to fail": a chronopolitical misalignmen**t** when expectations accelerated beyond their capacity to comply.

The discussion that follows considers how these temporal demands were *felt* — as pressure, surveillance, and acceleration — and how they shaped the fragile work of early desistance, contingent less on motivation than on synchronising with imposed calendars.

3.2.1 Setting the Supervised Tempo

This section argues that first-day probation operates less as an administrative checkpoint than as a chronopolitical device: structuring, allocating, and surveilling time as a form of power. In a dromological frame (power exercised through speed: Virilio, 2006), probation paces early freedom, demanding temporal discipline by imposing clocks, calendars and deadlines that calibrate compliance (Thompson, 1967; Foucault, 1977).

Of the roughly 60,000 people released from prison in the UK each year, approximately half are placed on probation or licence out in the community (MoJ, 2023). Probation places one in a state of 'supervision', requiring compliance with rules and conditions set by the service and making men subject to regular check-ins, restrictions on travel and association, curfews, and mandated participation in programmes (rehabilitation, drug treatment, employment schemes).

Supervision, therefore, does not just happen (Fitzgibbon et al., 2017, p.318) – it is not just a meeting that takes place – it is *felt*. Chronopolitically, supervision does not just fill appointments on a calendar; it colonises the temporal fabric of everyday life. All time becomes surveilled and supervised: whether in a meeting, waiting for the next appointment, or going about daily life. Men's entire temporal horizon becomes governed by probation's schedules, conditions, and the looming possibility of recall. Even when they're not physically in the office, men live as if under the clock, remaining tethered to the temporal expectations of supervision.

Extending McNeill's account of pervasive supervision (2019), I show how its audit rhythms re-time everyday life – sequencing effort around calendars and making compliance a matter of pace. As McNeill explains (ibid), the effects of supervision are diffuse, pervading the lives of the supervisees; before, between and after meetings. Probation was far more than just where the men spent one hour of their release day, it symbolized the very precarity of the men's position in the free world: their first appointment as a free man is a scheduled check-in at probation. "You are free… unless you miss probation" I remember one of the men joking at the gate. And thus, in the backdrop of the men's first day of freedom, is the reminder that freedom arrives conditional and clock-bound. Supervision creates a chronopolitical order in which men's days are organised around institutional time, not their own — freedom itself becomes measured, rationed, and monitored.

Moreover, supervision not only dictates how time is spent day-to-day but also establishes the temporal benchmarks by which progress and failure are judged. Tick-box exercises compress complex realities into binary categories, erasing the slow, emotional work of adjustment that is essential to resettlement, but rarely legible to a tick-box. In doing so, they enforce a rapid tempo in which even hesitation, let alone misstep, risks being interpreted as failure. Likewise, the reductive, deficit model mobilised by probation – as evidenced by the "*Are these going to be a problem for you"* questionnaire – does more than signal an institutional expectation of failure; it actively participates in shaping the subjectivities of those under

supervision. The anticipatory categorization underpinning probation practice positions men as risks to be managed rather than capable agents of change.

This framing inevitably infiltrates self-understandings: despite the misalignment between lived expectations and evaluations and supervised expectations and evaluations, men feel equally burdened to oblige to both. And because, ultimately, it is the institutional evaluations that carry the power to dictate recall or arrest, men struggled to appraise their own progress without internalising them. In this way, knowledge of supervision is not neutral; it operates as a structuring condition that shapes how men appraise their resettlement prospects and the very attainability of desistance. The suspended threat of recall then functions as a further mechanism, tethering every plan, goal, and ambition to the possibility of institutional intervention, casting the very work of change as precarious, fragile, and temporally contingent.

Like Aakesh in the car, dreaming of a life in Canada before realising his licence would not permit it, most of the men in my study were acutely aware of the limitations on their autonomy imposed by their licence. They knew they were to be bound spatially and temporally for the foreseeable future, living within constraints on their autonomy that were imposed rather than chosen. This awareness was not abstract; it carried a tangible affective weight. The loss of autonomy inflicted a quiet, ongoing pain – a sense of being tethered and surveilled even as they stepped into 'freedom'.

The literature on probation supervision suggests that this liminal state creates ambivalence and unease (Rennie & Crewe, 2023), an insight corroborated by my own observations. For many prison leavers, the strict requirements and conditions of probation coupled with constant supervision can create feelings of continued imprisonment. This continuous monitoring during and between meetings invokes "constant uneasiness" (Rennie & Crewe, 2023), partially because it also produces a hyperawareness of one's vulnerability to recall. One cannot think of their probation officer, without thinking of the looming threat of recall. The men, consequently, are living a "life under tremendous threat", as Durnescu puts it (2011:538). In Crewe's (2011:522) pivotal work on experiencing punishment, he describes this precise feeling as

"tightness": feelings of tension and anxiety generated by uncertainty (see also Freeman & Seymour, 2010) – "not knowing which way to move, for fear of getting things wrong" (Crewe 2011:522).

And this fear of failure was not unfounded. With the total number of people being recalled to prison increasing in recent years – rising by 22% in a single year (MoJ, 2015, 2016a, 2017) –, and roughly 30% of individuals on supervision reconvicted within a year of release (MoJ, 2022). Recall operates as an ever-present threat, shaping how men regulate their behaviour under supervision. Research also shows that recall itself compounds vulnerability, with close to 50% of those released under executive re-release powers being recalled to custody again before completing their sentence (Fitzalan, 2019).

One of the greatest frustrations expressed by my respondents was that the decisions of whether they'd 'failed' or not were made in the hands of others. In other words, their future lay in someone else's hands. *Desisting from* versus *persisting in* crime was no longer a negotiation one made with oneself; it was supervised, moderated and adjudicated by one's probation officer. Here, evaluative misalignment was at the root of the frustration: men felt they were moving at a tentative, transitional pace, still finding their footing whilst making gradual progress; whereas probation measured them against an accelerated tempo where even hesitation risked being read as failure. Within supervised rhythms, slow adjustment was read as evidence of risk. Desistance was less a matter of intent or sustained effort than of synchronising with probation's accelerated tempo, meeting its markers of success at the right pace and on time. As a result, the men felt like passive recipients rather than active participants in their own desistance story:

'*They've* set me up to fail" …"*They've* decided I'm homeless…' '*They* won't let me see my brother…".

This was especially evident when men discussed the threat of recall:

"*They* decided to recall me" … "Then *they* went and recalled me"…"*They'll* recall you for nothing."

The opacity of information delivery left men feeling uncertain, powerless and obedient – not dissimilar from how they felt in prison when the prison's imposed rhythm overrode their own lived rhythms. Arnie's frustration before his release — "I don't even know my conditions of parole… Will the prison just tell me

at the gate?" — exemplifies how men often step into supervision with incomplete knowledge, intensifying their sense of powerlessness. Men also often felt they disagreed with probation about what was in their best interest. Daryl, for instance, questioned the advice to avoid immediate work:

> My PO thinks it'll be good for me to live in an AP and not jump immediately into work while battling my addiction. But I think, without work, it'll be hard to find a 'positive use of time' when I'm stuck sitting around in an AP all day. I think I'm bound to turn to drugs.

Milo expressed similar concerns about being required, by licence, to attend weekly drug and alcohol support sessions at a local venue: "What they [PO] don't realize is that that place is dangerous for recovering addicts. There are dealers waiting in the parking lot outside for you when you finish your session. That's how they get you."

Here, disagreement was not only about the substance of probation's decisions but also about their pace. Men imagined re-entry as a tentative process of finding their footing, while probation imposed a rapid timetable in which delay or dissent could be reinterpreted as failure. The inability to slow down, voice concerns, or participate in setting the tempo of their own resettlement left men feeling frustrated and constrained.

These accounts also underline that probation can inadvertently reproduce criminogenic contexts. Rather than enabling hooks for change (Giordano et al., 2002), certain conditions channel men back into the very environments they sought to escape. In temporal as well as spatial terms, men's local knowledge offered a more granular sense of what would sustain or derail progress. They often knew that "waiting around" was riskier than starting work immediately, or that the timing of mandated appointments placed them directly in harm's way. Their warnings about specific streets, housing blocks, or mandated programmes reveal how supervision sometimes overlooked the fine-grained realities of what actually constitutes a criminogenic context. Yet by reducing – or at times removing entirely – men's agency to shape their own pathways, probation risks homogenizing these experiences to create one universal timeline of progress, imposing a single tempo of adjustment that erases the varied paces at which men might actually move forward.

The mandatory visit to probation thus symbolised the precarity of their position in the free world, reminding them that 'freedom' itself was conditional, measured, and continually assessed by others. As one participant reflected, "I've had enough of this. I haven't come off of licence since 2011, almost 12 years. There's obviously a problem with the system. I'm failing constantly. Why am I failing?" His words capture the dissonance between the promise of freedom and the regulatory grip of supervision — a misalignment that permeated the earliest stages of resettlement.

In sum, probation on the first day of release was more than a logistical step; it installed a chronopolitical order that structured how men's time was spent and how their progress was evaluated. Surveillance was diffuse, extending beyond the office into the fabric of everyday life, tethering men to institutional schedules and the threat of recall. Institutional markers of success overrode men's own sense of gradual progress, and probation's accelerated timelines replaced men's lived rhythms, recasting tentative adjustment as hesitation or risk. This strict and surveilled tempo set the frame within which other obstacles unfolded — from the temporal bottlenecks of housing, finances, and bureaucracy to the pervasive sense of being 'set up to fail' when expectations outpaced men's capacity to comply.

3.2.2 Deadlines and Delays

This section argues that the first day of release confronts men with a dense set of structural constraints that shape their trajectories before they have even begun to refamiliarize, let alone re-establish, themselves. These constraints are not neutral but operate as temporal bottlenecks: multiple urgent demands compressed into narrow windows, channelling or obstructing early desistance by pace and sequence as much as by substance.

Early on in my fieldwork, one senior officer remarked: "If they are going to be back in here, you usually know on the first day" – a remark I initially dismissed as cynicism but came to see as an empirical observation: many of the challenges that later led the men to be recalled were already present on Day 1.

Accordingly, men often described feeling intense pressure to set their trajectory "on the right course" immediately, or risk being read as failing. There was little room for misstep or errors on the first day of release, even though opportunities for misstep were built into almost every moment. What counted as a 'misstep' or 'failure', however, was rarely self-defined: it was measured against supervised tempos that rendered hesitation or gradual adjustment suspect.

Some insurmountable challenges arose as early as one's very first moments of freedom at the prison gate. As one Resettlement Officer explained: "I had one guy released at 3 p.m. who had his probation meeting scheduled in Devon! When he was late they said he'd breached [his licence], so the police were already waiting for him when he got there [probation]." Late releases were common during my fieldwork, and they were almost always brought on by circumstances out of the men's control. They triggered immediate missteps, forcing men to begin their first day of freedom already 'behind schedule', with both practical and psychological consequences. In the best-case scenario, late releases produced heightened anxiety about missing probation meetings or reaching housing offices before they closed. In the worst cases, they led directly to recall, rearrest, or nights spent sleeping rough. Even in the best cases, they compounded the stress of an already fraught day. The stress of being released late is only made worse when men are released on a Friday. Between 2022 and early 2023, close to one in every three prison-leavers were leaving custody on a Friday (MoJ, 2023). This meant the added pressure of getting to probation and accessing critical support – such as finding a bed for the night, registering with a GP and signing up with the job centre – before services shut for the weekend. What should have been a day of transition instead became a race against time.

The literature is clear that returning to one's community is rarely straightforward: despite the fact that most formerly incarcerated individuals return to the same communities in which they were sentenced (Kirk 2009; Harding et al. 2013; Chamberlain and Wallace 2016), the process of *re-entering* or *returning* to their communities poses a number of unique, additional challenges for the individual. On average, the incarcerated population has limited education (Heitzeg 2009; Meiners and Winn 2014; Doleac 2018),

limited work experience (Farrington et al. 1986; Burdett et al. 2003; Doleac 2016), high rates of severe mental illness (Massoglia and Schnittker 2009; Yi et al. 2017), heightened anxiety and experiences of emotional trauma (Piel 2020), a high risk of suicide (Pratt et al. 2006), and high rates of substance use disorders (Bronson et al. 2017; Alexander et al. 2020).

In addition to these vulnerabilities, likely exacerbated by time spent in prison, release poses additional, unique challenges. Because of what scholars have dubbed the 'collateral consequences of punishment' (Kirk and Wakefield 2018), securing a job (Pager 2003; 2008), finding somewhere to live (Gojkovic et al. 2012), receiving support (Rade et al. 2016), and building meaningful relationships (Burnett 2004; Gadd and Farrall 2004) becomes more challenging after prison release. Researchers have put forth numerous hypotheses for the mechanisms responsible for producing these difficulties upon release. These include limited self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), the disruption of social and familial ties (Sampson and Laub 2003), the broader influence on social networks upon release (Hagan 1993), the labeling effects and stigma associated with a criminal record (Schwartz and Skolnick 1962), the loss of human capital (Becker 1975), the trauma of the incarceration itself (Parenti 1999), as well as the legal barriers to employment that the record may cause (Dale 1976). Pager (2003) goes as far as to argue that the 'negative credential' associated with a criminal record is a stratifying mechanism on its own.

Critically, these dynamics have a temporal form. And many manifest immediately, presenting themselves as early as day one. Collateral consequences translate into temporal bottlenecks: man released unemployed, unhoused, and unsupported will feel the impact before the day is out. Here, collateral consequences translated into temporal bottlenecks: stigma, weakened networks and lost capital amplify one another to create cascading delays, so that even basic tasks — registering with a GP, presenting as homeless, accessing Universal Credit — are sequenced by prerequisites and narrow windows. These compressed responsibilities – echoed in Halushka's *Getting the Runaround* – constitute "waiting as governance" in practice (Sharma, 2014): access rationed by queues, opening hours and service backlogs rather than by need.

Each of these barriers, arising almost instantly, was a reminder that the 'free' world was structured by deadlines and bottlenecks – where everything happens at once, under deadlines, with no room for delay. And unfortunately, these barriers operate independently of individual intent or motivation. By virtue of being released from prison, every man in my sample, even those actively committed to change, encountered immediate and often formidable obstacles.

For some, the chain of events leading to recall could begin within hours of leaving custody; for others, structural and social constraints surfaced upon arrival in their home communities. In both cases, men were left in a state of anticipatory vigilance, forced to temper any potential moments of hope with the anticipation of the next challenge – a challenge that felt both inevitable and unforeseeable. Time itself became compressed, with men living as if the next demand, deadline, or disruption was already looming. All the while, every action, or inaction, was paced and judged by probation, folding day-to-day challenges into a regime of evaluation.

Such conditions proved corrosive to the hopeful, agentic desistance that much of the academic literature presupposes. These structural constraints did not just block access to resources; they produced temporal bottlenecks that left men permanently out of step, cultivating a chronopolitical condition of anticipatory failure. As the following section illustrates, these early experiences reveal how difficult it is to cultivate motivation and intention within environments structured by uncertainty, surveillance, and constraint.

3.2.3 Outpaced

This section argues that the immediate pressures and obstacles encountered on the first day of release reverberate inward, shaping men's self-perceptions and eroding the sense of agency needed to sustain desistance. Rather than describing emotional responses, this analysis considers how external structural constraints become internalised, producing subjectivities marked by anxiety, disorientation, and, for some, resignation.

For many, the transition from incarceration to the community was described as anxiety-ridden, disorienting, and precarious. Research has long noted that even brief periods of incarceration can foster feelings of 'learned helplessness' and diminished self-efficacy (Fazel et al., 2008) – effects that persist beyond prison walls. These psychological burdens were then amplified by the accelerated demands of a world that had not slowed down during their absence (Visher & Travis, 2003). In this frame, speed itself becomes consequential: as clocks tighten, confidence thins.

As evidenced by Hector in the Job Centre or Karl's candid confession to his RESTART worker, seemingly mundane aspects of contemporary life – online banking, self-service checkouts – emerged as intimidating or incomprehensible (Goffman, 2009). And in the compressed tempo of the first day, even small errors or hesitations acquired disproportionate emotional weight, reinforcing the sense of "falling behind" before one had begun. Experiencing aspects of everyday life as inaccessible undoubtedly undermines one's confidence in their ability to adjust and destabilised one's motivation, making it harder to envision and pursue a positive, productive future.

The stigma of a criminal record further undermines self-belief. As Maruna (2001) argues, identity work is crucial to desistance, yet many of the men reported experiencing stigma as an active force eroding that work. Feelings of inadequacy and social exclusion were commonplace, leaving men struggling to imagine themselves as valued members of their communities. The result was a fragile sense of agency, easily destabilised by setbacks.

At the structural level, instability around housing and employment generated an environment of constant insecurity (Cunningham & Sorensen, 2007), which in turn weakens the motivation to seek long-term solutions (Fazel et al., 2008). When basic needs such as accommodation, income, or food could not be secured, there was little space—practically or psychologically—for future-oriented thinking (Mani et al., 2013; Visher & Travis, 2003). These conditions fostered what some described as cycles of disadvantage, where each barrier intensified the others and diminished motivation. These cycles reinforced chronopolitics:

every action, and inaction, was measured against probation's timelines, reinforcing a perception that falling short was both inevitable and imminent.

The contrast between pre-release planning and post-release lived reality proved sharp. In prison, men often articulated clear goals with RESTART staff, but the constraints they encountered after release – many beyond their control – quickly rendered those plans unworkable. Some barriers, like delayed housing applications or administrative oversights, were foreseeable and might have been prevented by better planning. As Fitzalan (2019:186) notes, limited and last-minute release planning often reflects systemic overload rather than individual neglect, a finding borne out repeatedly in my fieldwork. Others, such as widespread employer discrimination against those with criminal records (Rovira, 2023), were systemic and inescapable. Temporally, both kinds of barrier did the same work: they collapsed rehearsed futures by failing to materialise in time.

For example, what good would the several job interviews lined up for Peter do now that he's learned he's homeless? How can the discussions about 'avoiding negative influences' come to fruition now that Milo has no choice but to "crash on his friend's sofa". It was precisely these unexpected and unavoidable challenges, despite men's planning and motivation, that led to the greatest frustration. With each new challenge that arose, men described a creeping sense of futility, a feeling that no amount of effort could keep pace with the demands placed upon them. Men who had once expressed optimism in prison began, within hours of release, to articulate a sense that they were "set up to fail" and not being given a "fair shot" to desist from the very first day out.

With their futures out of their control and their own time seemingly suspended, while probation's clock kept ticking, men felt the odds were stacked against them: "With nowhere to go and no money, I am basically set up to fail", Brandon pleaded with me. "I know I have to take some responsibility, but I just can't seem to get out of this cycle." Much like earlier adjustments to probation's unyielding tempo, the structural constraints met upon release also left many men adjusting or abandoning their goals altogether. Colin, a man who had spoken so passionately of his goals of employment and a crime-free life, very quickly

accepted that these goals were out of his reach: “How can I live with no income? I have to resort to crime. They’ve left me no choice but to commit crime again. So yeah, I’ll be back inside by Friday. Guaranteed.”

Such reflections highlight how structural constraints – rather than individual unwillingness – reshape men’s intentions in real time. Much like the compromises men made in response to probation’s rigidity, these post-release impediments forced many to scale back or abandon their aspirations altogether. Hector’s words capture the bleakness of this recalibration: “I’ve just got no chance at the minute. They won’t give my UC when I come out, and then they arrest me before it comes through. I have no choice but to steal food.” Here, waiting-as-governance is clearest: benefits, ID and housing are paced by service windows and queues, and the cost of delay accrues to the person, not the system.

In sum, the first day of release did not just test men’s plans; it transformed them. External constraints became internalised as doubt and resignation, eroding the motivational structures that men worked alongside RESTART to create, and that desistance theory treats as a prerequisite for change. This is the misalignment at the heart of day one: timetabled expectations outrun lived capacities, and the work of desistance is re-cast as keeping time with other people’s clocks. Within the chronopolitical order of supervision and structural bottlenecks, slow adjustment became reinterpreted as failure, leaving men feeling ‘set up to fail’ from the very start.

3.3CONCLUSION

“*Those first 24-48 hours are critical for you because—*”

“*—I either fail or fly.*”

(Fieldnotes, Pos. 3987)

The first day of release emerged not as a neutral handover from custody to community but as a compressed site of governance, tempo-setting, surveillance and constraint. Time was no longer suspended but

accelerated: probation set the pace, bureaucracies imposed bottlenecks, and every task was shadowed by the risk of sanction or recall if men fell behind. Freedom felt less like an open horizon and more like a tightly governed sequence of obligations.

This compression produced a form of temporal whiplash. Men stepped from the slow, regimented time of custody into an unforgiving schedule of surveillance and resettlement. Even mundane errands — collecting medication, attending induction, applying for benefits — became decisive tests of whether they could keep up. By tracing the men's movements from the gate to probation, and through the immediate tasks of housing, welfare and survival, we see how moments of excitement and possibility are repeatedly punctured by conditions of surveillance, bureaucratic delay and structural constraint. These dynamics are not peripheral – they actively structure early desistance work, shaping how men imagine their futures and recalibrate or abandon their carefully articulated plans and goals.

These dynamics reveal the non-linearity of resettlement. Release did not deliver a clean break between imprisonment and freedom, but a dislocated passage through misaligned tempos, where institutional demands moved faster than men could. Seen through this lens, the first 24 hours are a revealing early landscape in which institutional tempo, structural constraint, and individual aspiration collide — a chronopolitical misalignment in which timetabled expectations outpace lived capacities. The patterns traced here foreshadow the analysis in the next chapter, where these early fractures are followed into the longer run to examine how – and whether – men manage to turn such precarious beginnings into sustainable change.

4 First Month

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The 'free' world is full of barriers: The council needs to see you asleep outside for three consecutive nights before they can 'verify' you homeless and begin the process of finding you accommodation. For most men, this meant they were coming out of prison homeless for the first 3-7 nights. You might be on benefits, but the moment you are arrested your claim gets shut so you return to the outside world to a closed claim and no money. You may want to work, but good luck finding an employer who will see your DBS results and hire you. And if you're lucky enough to find one, good luck keeping that job when you're homeless and only own a single pair of clothes. And what about people? The good influences have cut you off entirely, the bad ones are constantly trying to reel you back in to their suffocating grip. Each of these barriers constantly reminding you 'you do not deserve this new life', until you eventually start to believe it.

(Fieldnotes, Pos. 3056)

4 INTRODUCTION

The first month after release from prison marks a critical juncture in the resettlement and desistance process. National statistics underscore its volatility: one in three prison-leavers in England and Wales are either recalled, re-arrested, or reoffend within this initial period (MoJ, 2022). The pattern held true in this study, with nearly 40% of participants returning to custody within the first four weeks of release.

By the end of this first month, just under two-thirds of the original 150 men were still in the community, with the remainder either back in custody or temporarily out of contact (see 1.1.2, Figure 1). The ethnographic material in this chapter is therefore weighted towards men whose lives were, at least intermittently, anchored in hostels, supported accommodation or known rough-sleeping sites that RESTART and probation could reach. The three case studies in the descriptive section sit along a spectrum that was common in the cohort: men in precarious state housing, men in carceral housing (Approved Premises) and men trying to survive with no scaffold at all.

In the aftermath of release, men are often spoken about as making choices: Do they reoffend or not? Do they reconnect with old networks or pursue new routines? Do they return to familiar neighbourhoods or start fresh and relocate? This chapter asks what happens when those choices are structured by scarcity, surveillance, and systemic neglect. Recall that we left many of our men feeling ‘set up to fail’ in the first 24 hours of release, as their lived pace of change misaligned with the expectations set by the supervised tempo. This chapter follows the men through the first month of release — a period where desistance was not a singular decision, but a series of fragile, high-stakes negotiations under chronocracy (rule by time).
It demonstrates that early scaffolding can be conditional and time-bound; depending on the timing of its arrival and the stability of its tenure, the very scaffolds intended to stabilise men can function simultaneously as surveillance, destabilising their desistance efforts.

The scaffold of most relevance at this stage was housing. Across temporary hostels, supervised housing, and nights on the street, the men in this study navigated what Sampson and Loeffler (2010) call 'structural traps': spatial and institutional conditions that constrain agency and amplify risk. These traps – from unsafe housing placements to coercive supervision and chronic homelessness – shape not just opportunity, but identity, safety, and self-perception. In practice, housing appeared in three forms – precarious state housing, carceral housing (Approved Premises), and street-level survival – each binding shelter to compliance in ways that produced instability rather than security.

Where Chapter 2 explored how prison shapes expectations, and Chapter 3 traced how institutional demands shape the terms of release, this chapter turns to the concrete and chaotic terrain of everyday life: how men survive, resist, or relapse in the face of housing insecurity, financial precarity, and round-the-clock monitoring enforcing chronocracy. It shows, specifically, how housing, an important scaffold, can curb men's temporal autonomy through curfews, inspections, no-guest rules, short-stay contracts, and the constant threat of breach or recall – and more broadly how scaffolding, when late, conditional or time-bound, can have destabilising effects on desistance practice.

Section 4.1 opens with three first-month vignettes: support that arrives late, support that never arrives, and shelter delivered under supervision. Section 4.2 develops the analysis: 4.2.1 sets out scarcity, administrative waiting, and short horizons. 4.2.2 examines precarious state housing as conditional scaffolding. 4.2.3 reads carceral housing as shelter by timetable. 4.2.4 traces street-level survival under zero scaffold. What emerges is a portrait of fragile beginnings: lives rebuilt moment by moment in structurally hostile conditions. The chapter foregrounds how early outcomes hinge not just on intent, but on infrastructure – and how failure, in this first month, is often not a matter of will, but of context and timing. By focusing on housing support in the first month, the chapter shows how conditional scaffolding can generate short-term alignment while seeding later fragility – setting up the longer-run dynamics developed in Chapter 5.

4.1 DESCRIPTION

The sections that follow trace men's experiences in the first month after prison. They showcase how men negotiated desistance under conditions of extreme precarity, limited agency, and heightened chronocracy. Across each section, housing support appears as conditional and time-bound – so that what should scaffold and stabilise instead surveils, controls and limits.

All three stories illustrate the misalignment between men's lived timelines and those imposed by probation, councils and charities. When something as critical as shelter and accommodation is entirely dependent on others' timelines, men's desistance bears the cost. '*T&S'* (4.1.1) demonstrates the uneven arrival of scaffolding, Recall Risk by Design (4.1.2) shows its complete absence, and Under Observation (4.1.3) shows present-but-scheduled scaffolding – all different faces of the same mechanism where institutional time governs men's lives.

4.1.1 *'T&S'*

After four nights rough sleeping, Sid was the first to get a temporary housing offer. His probation officer (PO) had secured an emergency housing grant to cover one-week at a local hotel, buying time while they awaited other offers and referrals were being 'processed'. It was help, but time-bound help – a scaffold that arrived on the council's clock and would depart on it too. Eight days into his release, TJ came to me with a confession: "If I tell you something, you promise not to tell anyone? It can be in your book, but only in the future once we're safe." I had no idea what to expect but I'd nodded before I'd thought it through.

"I'm sleeping on Sid's floor," he said, holding my gaze. "Only until I get somewhere myself. And it was Sid's idea, he didn't want me out on the street when he'd been offered a place. He knows he could get

recalled if they find out, but he didn't even think twice." The men who had never met before prison but shared a car ride to probation, now had an unbreakable bond.

As his PO had expected, by his second week of release, Sid had received two more short-term accommodation offers. TJ, on the other hand, hadn't received any. The third time around, Sid was under strict license conditions that there were to be no dwellers at his new flat overnight, and he was subject to random inspections and strict curfew. Those conditions effectively deputised Sid to enforce them against TJ – care was made conditional on compliance. In the end, it was TJ who ultimately decided he wouldn't sabotage Sid's chances and turned down Sid's invitation to 'risk it' and sleep on his floor.

It was in week three that the cracks began to show. Monday night, TJ crashed on his old mate Kev's sofa, shoes still on, staring at the ceiling until daylight broke through the blinds. The next night it was Dean's spare mattress, no sheets, just his coat pulled over him. Wednesday another place. Thursday another. Each time he told himself it was just until something better came through.

But nothing came.

By the weekend his 'lucky streak', as he called it, had been broken. He then spent two nights rough sleeping under the stairwell behind the Co-op, his trainers tucked under his head so they "wouldn't get nicked". "It's fine," he told me with a shrug, "I can do a couple nights out, no bother." Only his characteristic smile wasn't fooling us any longer – his face looked tired, and body deflated.

By Monday, he found somewhere else – "a mate of a mate" he reassured me. Smoke in the walls, people coming and going all night. He reassured me he'd keep his head down. Another night, another bed, another debt. Before another inevitable break in the 'lucky streak'.

And then there were the other nights.

Nights when someone offered him more than a sofa. Nights where he used sex to secure somewhere to stay. Nights where he paid, in cash or in kind, for a few hours indoors. He called it "hustling"; in practice it was

survival under governed waiting, where support arrived on institutional time and surveillance policed the tactics that waiting produced.

Both TJ and Sid had been offered work at the same company through the employment programme in prison. In our first car ride from prison, I remember the men making plans for their shared morning commutes. Sid would go to work the following Monday, saving a seat on the bus for TJ, who wouldn't show. Sid would come up with some excuse in his head for where his friend might be, as he would for the next 100 morning bus rides before he eventually restored his driving license and began driving to work. Sid couldn't face the fact that his friend TJ was back in the forbidden place he swore he'd never return to. Waiting on housing that didn't arrive, he returned to the one place where the door was always open for him: prison.

What ultimately separated the two men was timing and allocation. And as Sid said on the first night he received housing and his friend hadn't: "a system that leaves success up to luck and chance is a broken system".

Both men were released the same day to the same city. Both sat in my car and sang the tunes of freedom. Both had a job, a future, a plan for a better life. TJ looked at his older companion and smiled: "Didn't I say the sun would be shining for us, Sid." But who the sun shone on was pure luck. One made it and one didn't. 50% recidivism rate, just like the statistics tell us. On paper it reads like a coin flip; in practice it was timing and conditionality.

In that first car ride from the prison parking lot, before all the bad news of housing, TJ had asked me: "Can you mention us in your book, Helen?"

"Oh I will 100% be writing about this car ride in my book, don't you worry" we all laughed as the music blared through our open windows and we rode down the open roads with the men vaping in the back seats.

"You can't use real names though, right?" Sid asked.

"No that's right, I can't use your real names."

“That’s fine”, TJ said, “just call me T.”

“—And call me S.”

“And then everyone will know the story of T and S”, T said with his characteristic smile.

“I hope so”, I smiled.

Together, T and S show us that institutional time and lived time do not align by the first month. In the gap, men wait – sometimes indefinitely – for scaffolding that is delayed, expires quickly, or never comes: two nights in a hostel, a short-term accommodation offer from a charity, a council application that is left pending without update. Here, time is the mechanism. This *administrative waiting* keeps life in limbo, paced by others’ timetables (councils, charities, probation), so that the very scaffold intended to stabilise risks destabilising. Moreover, when housing did arrive, it was conditional and surveilled: its presence was tied to rules (no-guests, inspections, curfew). Therefore, when help arrives unevenly and holds only under strict conditions, the scaffold becomes surveillance – entrenching misalignment and destabilising desistance.

4.1.2 Recall Risk by Design

After 27 days out in the community, Ant had reoffended, was charged with a new offence, and was sent back to prison within the first month of release. This marked Ant’s 12th time in prison at age 28. The 10th and 11th also took place during my fieldwork. All three arrests happened within the first four weeks of release.

“It’s always the same cycle.” He told me. “I’m always ready. I’m always positive. And here is how it goes. This is what happens: I’m homeless, then it’s drugs to numb the pain, then it’s prison. That’s the cycle every time. I come out, find out I’m homeless, start using, and end up back in prison. Homeless, drugs, prison, homeless, drugs, prison – it’s a cycle.” He continued: “I come out so positive and then straight away I get

told: 'you're homeless.'" Housing support ran on someone else's timetable – verification, assessments, offers – and in the meantime there was only waiting.

"I've never been the kind of guy who says, 'oh I'd rather be inside' or 'I'm better off inside', but I have to admit that at the end of this last release, for the first time, I began thinking, 'I *am* better off in there.'"

"Let's zoom in on this cycle", I said, "what's going on in your head let's say just before the prison part, when you're homeless and using drugs and contemplating going back in?"

And Ant recounted his experience for me:

> Well, I'm lugging stuff around. You can't leave things or they'll get nicked. Tent, sleeping bag, everything on you. You're walking, not knowing when your next meal is coming. You steal to eat. I'm a good criminal, I'm smart… but yeah, you're definitely stealing just to eat.
>
> Last time I was out, I had these wounds on my leg and feet that got really badly infected. Being outside, sleeping on the ground, not being able to shower and clean my cuts, and using [drugs] was making the infection so much worse. I would be using the same dirty, unwashed fingers that are rolling and injecting needles to then squeeze pus out of my infected legs. It was absolutely horrible.
>
> And I was in so much pain with my legs. I remember one night walking 25 minutes to where I leave my tent, and my legs were so sore. I hadn't eaten in more than 20 hours. I was so tired. I just needed to lie down and sleep. I got to my tent and found that the council had taken my tent and sleeping bag. It was all gone. And I was so tired, that I just crashed on someone's front doorstep, no sleeping bag, nothing. I woke up and found everything I had on me was stolen.

"What is going through your head in that moment?" I asked, realizing his thick descriptions of homelessness had left me near speechless.

> My mum. Funny enough, I remember thinking about my mum. She would worry so much about me. One day I remember her crying, she said to me: 'if you don't go back inside, you're going to die out here.' I thought she was exaggerating. But sitting there, staring at my infected legs, all my belongings gone, woozy from the lack of food, for the first time I thought to myself: she's right.
>
> At least in jail I don't have infections. I can have a shower. I can wash my cuts. I can have a hot meal. I can sleep without the fear of being assaulted or having my things stolen. So that night I decided: I am going to get myself arrested.

Ant, like TJ, knew the recall clock better than the housing clock; one was predictable, the other undefined.

“I know how to not get arrested for months, so this time I had to work out something just bad enough for eight weeks. I wanted to be out for Christmas.”

He carried on.

“I then proceeded to try for the next three days to get myself arrested,” he said, half-laughing. “Three days! It’s hilarious because when they catch me I’m never trying to get caught, but now that I was *trying* to get caught and it was taking days.”

He summarised it as a sequence:

> Balaclava on, I go straight to city centre, I know where all the city’s cameras are. I would stand in full view of them and pretend to picking at a bike lock. Didn’t seem to work. I’d find the nicest and most expensive-looking bike. Nothing. Next, I tried the off-licence that got robbed last week and started fiddling with the back door under the camera; still nothing. Finally, when I went to order a couple of Cokes from a kebab van, still wearing my balaclava, I just stood there, sort of waiting, until the police came. They grabbed me and took me to custody. Eight weeks, just like I planned.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, as Ant – precise, almost proud – set out the craft with which he orchestrated his own re-arrest. He knew how to get himself recalled the way Warren knew how to write his applications for housing: the men were well-versed; competences learned under scarcity. Other men had alluded to this tactic, but Ant was the first to narrate it in such rich, deliberate detail. That performative ease, the normalcy with which he described engineering his own imprisonment, left me shaken in a way other interviews hadn’t.

He finished his story with the same lightness he had carried the whole way through: “In custody, a doctor came to see my legs. He said three more days and I’d have gotten septicaemia and died. Mum was right.”

Ant’s case shows the flip side of the same mechanism: when no scaffold arrives, surveillance fills the gap. With housing mistimed or absent, rough sleeping, theft for food, street-level policing and recall risk governed his days. Because men cannot rely on a timeline that is unclear and unknown to them, they sometimes exert agency in the only predictable register available – recall. Persisting, then, is not a deficit of intent or effort; it is the exhaustion of waiting for safety and shelter that never arrive. In chronopolitical

terms, the only reliable clock was penal time: enforcement arrived on schedule; support did not. Waiting without end produced recall risk by design: enforcement arrived when support did not.

4.1.3 Under Observation

Six texts from Ed in 10-second intervals. 9:21 p.m.

It was unusual to receive texts from the RESTART workers after hours, particularly Ed.

“Riley’s been attacked. He’s in hospital. He will be fine. He needs surgery. Will be a bit of a recovery, but he will be fine. More details incoming.”

My heart rate jumped and I called immediately, the phone ringing before the three dots of his unfinished seventh message disappeared. It was after 9 p.m. on a Tuesday, but he answered. Of course he answered.

“What happened?” I asked him. But he didn’t know much. He had only been notified because when Riley registered for his GP, he had listed Ed, his RESTART worker, as his emergency contact.

Five days later I got a text from Ed: “How does this Thursday at the AP sound? We have probation at 2 p.m. so can be back for 3?”

I was meeting Riley back at his AP less than a week after his attack. Ed and Riley had just finished at probation, where Riley had to show his wounds and hospital wristband as his alibi for missing his daily check-ins at his AP to his upset probation officer. Proof had to be legible on institutional time – a time-stamped wristband to reconcile an absence against supervision’s relentless schedule.

“They didn’t even ask me what happened.” Riley shrugged.

“They didn’t even ask you how you were doing or feeling, Riley,” Ed added, shaking his head in disapproval.

Given the unforgiving tempo of supervised resettlement, it was unsurprising that Riley was required to return to his AP as soon as the hospital had discharged him: discharge meant a return to scheduled compliance. The left side of his face was covered in bandages and gauze, but even still I could see the raw pink fleshy skin poking out between the white strips of gauze. The swelling was also visible, creating a raised fishbone shape from his cheekbone over to the side of his forehead. In his left hand, he still gripped his hospital wristband, perhaps preparing to prove his absence if anyone at the AP were to question him again.

As we sat just outside the AP, at a nearby picnic bench, Riley recounted what had happened, just a few hundred feet from where we sat. “Outside that house [he points], I was jumped. A guy came at me with a pipe and busted my cheek open. They had to do surgery on me.” Even then, I felt Riley justifying himself to me, as he narrated his attack as if under review. The defensive script he’d used in probation hadn’t yet loosened.

“Did you know the guy?” I asked.

“If you’ve grown up in jail like I have, everyone you know is what they call a ‘negative associate’. I’ve got a whole long list of ‘negative associates’. And that’s the problem with these places [APs]. People know where to find you.”

From what Riley described, the perpetrator had a track record of seemingly unprovoked attacks without facing any consequences.

“Do the police know?” His RESTART worker asked.

“Nothing will change.” And then he noticeably smirked, “Did I tell you he got a housing offer for after the AP? He’s got council housing lined up.”

Riley had been homeless for the last four of his releases and this time, like the others, he was leaving his AP without a list of pending applications, and no accommodation offers. There was no time built in for rest

or recovery. He'd be discharged straight back into uncertainty, despite what had happened just days before. The institutional clock overruled the slow, lived tempo recovery. He didn't dwell on it – not on the assault, or the housing, or the lack of support. But his expression when he mentioned the perpetrator getting a council flat said more than he realized: It wasn't just anger, it resembled resignation. Riley didn't expect fairness. He expected to be overlooked.

"Look I better get back inside now, they'll be doing room checks pretty soon."

"Of course," we said, and we let him go.

Riley shows the other side of waiting*:* even when scaffolding did arrive, it arrives with a schedule attached. Curfews, room checks, sign-ins, and timed permissions make 'home' operate like probation; stability was conditional on meeting time-sensitive expectations and keeping pace rather than on safety or recovery. Riley had a bed and a roof, but at the cost of his temporal autonomy: he had no say over the pace of recovery, over who he lived alongside, or when he could rest, leave or receive visits. His day—and by extension his resettlement—was designed by others. In this way, accommodation functioned less as scaffold than as surveillance: an annex of supervision that stabilised while stripping control.

4.2 DISCUSSION

Stability, in the early days after release, had to be improvised – patched together through moment-to-moment decisions, often under conditions of exposure, scarcity, and fatigue. Formal systems of resettlement did little to reduce that burden. This discussion demonstrates that housing support ran on institutional time – delayed in its arrival, time-limited in its tenure, and audited in its use – so that scaffolds intended to stabilise often operated as destabilising. Crucially, these disadvantages manifested chronopolitically: they scheduled men's days, constrained the routines they could sustain, allocated waiting, and narrowed temporal horizons.

In this landscape, desistance was not a binary choice between offending and not offending, but a constant stop-start, short-horizon, recalibration of timing – when to disclose, when to comply, when to disappear; how to make curfews, inspections, sign-ins, and council appointments align with unstable days. Decisions were not made in pursuit of progress, but in response to exhaustion, hunger, exposure, or fear. Supervision frameworks demanded visible progress while remaining indifferent to the disordered conditions in which that progress was meant to occur. Men were held individually responsible for navigating instability they did not create – and for demonstrating change in environments that made change extraordinarily difficult.

Accordingly, the four subsections develop this argument across distinct ecologies. Scarcity, Waiting, and Structural Squeeze (4.2.1) shows how scarcity and administrative waiting misalign clocks, delaying or withholding scaffolding at the very point it is most needed. Fragile Beginnings: Precarious State Housing (4.2.2) demonstrates how short, conditional, and insecure tenures – often tethered to criminogenic places – produce fragile, time-limited beginnings and reshape daily time-use. Carceral Housing: Supervised Resettlement (4.2.3) analyses Approved Premises as shelter attached to an audited timetable, where temporal autonomy is curtailed and 'support' functions as checkpoint. Survival under Zero Scaffold (4.2.4) turns to the boundary case: where no scaffold arrives, sanctions are punctual while support is indeterminate, horizons are foreshortened, and desistance is practised minute-to-minute as survival. Together, the following sections demonstrate that the first month is characterised by desistance practised under survival time: improvised and moment-to-moment, audited and time-bound, reliant on scant scaffolds, and foreshortened by misaligned clocks

4.2.1 Scarcity, Waiting, and Structural Squeeze

Men do not leave prison into a neutral landscape. The individual risk factors they carry — addiction histories, interrupted work records, health problems — collide with external conditions that can either scaffold or sabotage behavioural change. For the men in this study, these external conditions were not

merely challenging; they were actively hostile. In temporal terms, support ran on institutional time — delayed in its arrival, time-limited in its tenure, and audited in its use — while men lived on another clock. In this familiar gap of waiting-as-governance, is where men were expected to attempt desistance.

Take housing. A substantial body of research has long established that housing stability is strongly associated with reduced reoffending (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002; Niven & Stewart, 2005). Housing is not simply shelter; it is what Sampson and Laub (1993) call a 'structural scaffold': anchoring routines, enabling employment, and supporting social integration (Farrall, 2002). Without it, men are not just inconvenienced, they are actively exposed to what Clear (2007) terms a 'criminogenic social condition', creating a context that actively increases the likelihood of reoffending, as shown by national data indicating that prison leavers released homeless are more than twice as likely to reoffend (MoJ, 2023). Employment, strong social bonds, and access to stable income are other well-researched examples of structural scaffolds that support desistance (Farrall, 2002; Maruna, 2001).

But *when* and *how* those scaffolds arrive matters. When arrival is late or absent, men are left in a liminal space, attempting desistance unsupported. When arrival is conditional and the tenure short, the scaffold carries surveillance within it. The men in this study walked out of prison into a landscape with almost no readily available scaffolding. This cohort was released into a structurally hostile landscape, amidst co-occurring national housing and cost-of-living crises. In the sample, 127 of the 150 men (84.6%) walked out of custody with no fixed accommodation. They were stepping straight into a market that had fewer social homes than at any point in decades and waiting lists that stretch into years, not months (Shelter, 2023). Nationally, more than one million households were waiting for a council property (Shelter, 2023). In Oxford, where one fifth of my sample were released, the wait was between 10–20 years.

The first month of release, therefore, was marked by extreme 'structural squeeze': a landscape where supply and demand are so misaligned that even basic needs go unmet. In Autumn 2022, 3,069 individuals were recorded sleeping on the streets in England (HDLUHC, 2023), with local figures even starker: Oxford, for example, had seen a 400% increase in recorded rough sleeping since 2012 (Homeless Oxfordshire, 2023).

This structural squeeze extended administrative waiting time into the everyday: council lists, provider thresholds, gatekeeping criteria – routine practices of the first month after release. Practically, these conditions meant men became dependent on institutional timelines, where support could be withheld or delayed due to growing demand and inadequate supply. As a result, provision for basic needs – shelter, food, and income – was delayed or failed to materialise. Policies designed to mitigate these risks, such as the Offender Rehabilitation Act (2014) and the statutory 'Duty to Refer', were intended to provide early intervention, but fragmented implementation meant that referrals did not reliably translate into placements[18]. In a system stretched this thin, normal safeguards, such as referral mechanisms, were often rendered ineffective.

The housing crisis cannot be separated from the cost-of-living crisis. By mid-2023, 62% of adults reported rising living costs compared with the previous month (ONS, 2023). Men were leaving prison with a £76 discharge grant [19], which for some, was not even enough to cover the train or bus fare to their first probation appointment. With less than 8% having a stable job lined up immediately upon release, nearly two-thirds planned to apply for a social security benefit, such as Universal Credit (UC). But the typical five-week wait for a first UC payment created a dangerous income gap — a period in which bills accrue, food becomes unaffordable, and temporary housing cannot be sustained. The result was an all-too-familiar temporal misalignment: support and income arriving slowly (or not at all), while curfews, check-ins and sanctions proceeded apace.

In this context – where housing shortage meets escalating living costs – releasing men from custody without secure accommodation amounts to what Farmer (2004) frames as 'structural violence': predictable harm produced not by individual failings but by the way resources are rationed and distributed over time. In times of scarcity, those with the least social capital — including men leaving prison — are the first to experience delays or outright exclusion. As Wacquant (2009) reminds us, disadvantage is not distributed equally. Men

[18] 89% of men in this study reported receiving no effective housing support before RESTART, even when formally referred (findings echoed in Gojkovic et al., 2012).
[19] This later increased to £82.39, but did not extend to remand prisoners (CITE)

stepped into a context where the very resources essential for desistance were scarcest. This is particularly acute because these financial shocks disproportionately impact marginalised groups, burdening those already navigating criminal convictions, addiction histories, and fractured employment records (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018). In a structural squeeze, men are competing on the same overstretched housing lists and queuing at the same food banks as others with far greater capacity to navigate those systems — people with references, family connections, or financial buffers to draw on.

Taken together, these intersecting crises create conditions whereby men are released into a context where the scaffolding needed to support behavioural change was unavailable, delayed or if offered, short-term and conditional. And in a monumental time like the first month of release, the delay or absence of essential structural scaffolding as a result of scarcity, does not merely render desistance difficult, it destabilises it at its very foundations. In the first month, desistance continued to be a temporal problem: men must live on others' schedules, perform compliance under audit, and wait — sometimes indefinitely — for scaffolding that may never come. Limited housing, delayed benefits, and absent support systems did not simply make life difficult; they created the conditions for early failure — where desistance was no longer a personal goal but, for many, became a structural impossibility.

4.2.2 Fragile Beginnings: Precarious State Housing

As men began to rebuild their lives, housing shaped not only where they lived but how they lived in time.

With little control over location, quality, or duration, men were forced to practice desistance on unstable ground—time compressed by inspections, curfews, and notice periods, horizons shortened by tenures that could end at any moment. Importantly, the geographic, social, and material challenges that came with the precarious housing explored in this section, manifested chronopolitically: observable at the micro-scale and

felt in the everyday – determining how men spent their time, constraining temporal autonomy, and narrowing horizons.

For most men in this study, supported or council accommodation was the preferred, and most realistic, route to securing a roof over their head. Yet even among those relatively fortunate individuals who did receive temporary or council housing, the quality, location and tenure of these placements often undermined early-desistance efforts. Most offers took the form of short-stay agreements or probationary lets, signalling from the outset that tenure was contingent and time-bound.

Constraints on mobility further compounded this fragility. Even when motivated to leave behind criminogenic environments, men's ability to act on that intention was curtailed by statutory housing criteria which had strict eligibility criteria surrounding council housing residence (the 'local connection' requirement)[20]. This mechanism, intended to preserve local authority resources, effectively tethered men to the very neighbourhoods that had facilitated their previous offending. In doing so, it closed off the possibility of relocation as a desistance strategy, leaving those actively seeking a 'fresh start' feeling structurally denied the option.

Pat, who had spent years trying to manage his addiction whilst living in council housing surrounded by active users, explained how policy design, rather than personal motivation, can dictate the spatial and social contexts within which desistance efforts and attempts are situated: "For someone like me, who was ready to turn my life around, I would've definitely left if I could. Maybe then I wouldn't have lost years of my life to my addiction."

In principle, council or supported accommodation should offer men a fresh start and a sense of security. Yet the accounts from this study and wider data show that placement decisions rarely operate as neutral administrative acts; they embed individuals within specific spatial, temporal and social ecologies that can

[20] 'Local connection'—governing allocations (HA 1996 Pt 6) and homelessness duties (Pt 7)—can stem from residence, work, family ties or special circumstances (s.199); councils may gatekeep on this basis (DCLG 2013); prison time never counts because residence must be voluntary (MHCLG, *Homelessness code*, para 10.23).

actively shape behaviour. The accommodation offered was often embedded in the very environments men associated with addiction, offending, and criminality. This is borne out in wider data: studies show that 45% of social housing tenants in England fall within the lowest income quintile, and 44% live in poverty after housing costs (Tunstall & Pleace, 2018). Rates of unemployment (ibid) and mental health challenges (Johnson et al., 2006) are disproportionately high in these areas. Such figures also underscore how structural disadvantage is clustered spatially, concentrated within particular neighbourhoods (Holding et al., 2019). The distributions of disadvantage are not random but patterned by the spatial logics of poverty, stigma, and marginalisation.

These clusters of disadvantage do not just limit opportunities; they also shape identity and imagined futures. For men in this study, being rehoused in stigmatised estates often meant returning to places where their old identity – as someone enmeshed in crime – was already known and expected, rather than a place where a new identity could be rehearsed, supported and realised. And navigating a context like this introduces risk, which in turn shapes men's habits and everyday activity. The environments men were being asked to call 'home' were often littered with what Sampson and Loeffler (2010) call 'structural traps': spatial concentrations of disadvantage that constrain the capacity for behavioural change by embedding individuals back into criminogenic networks and reputational dynamics. When a new tenancy is embedded in the same networks, same micro-territories of risk, and same reputational dynamics that shaped offending before, these spatial concentrations of disadvantage can exert enduring constraints on residents' choices, temporalities and opportunities.

Lee recounts his return to prison within the first 2 weeks of release:

> The day my sister dropped me off at this place, and the *moment* she drove off, I got a knock from my upstairs neighbour. The first words out of his mouth were 'can you get me some cocaine?' That's really when it all kicked off: within one day of moving in. And 2 weeks later, I was back in prison.

Lee's account shows how formal rehousing policies and structural constraints manifest at the micro-scale: conversations on doorsteps, mundane interactions, encounters with neighbours, and split-second judgments

about safety and belonging cumulatively structure men's capacity to practice desistance in their everyday lives.

Material and sensory textures mattered too. Where one sleeps, what one sees from the window, sounds and smells in the hallway – these are not neutral backdrops but conditions that shape capacity to build new patterns. The quality of housing structures the very environment within which men attempt to desist. Unfortunately, social housing units in England are increasingly marked by overcrowding, poor sanitation, building disrepair, and unsafe environments. Such conditions mean that even when a tenancy is technically secured, the surrounding ecology can undermine its stabilising potential.

Sid described these conditions manifesting as a loss of dignity:

> When they housed me, I was so relieved. So relieved. Holding those keys in my hand felt like the happiest moment of my life. Then I went inside and found all the water and plumbing had been dismantled. There was literally no toilet or sink in the bathroom. I had to go and shower and use the toilet at my ex-partner's flat, where my kids live. Do you know how embarrassing that is, in front of my children, to have to come over because 'daddy has no running water at his new flat'.

Poor housing disrupted not only individual routines but also the men's ability to build and sustain prosocial relationships (Chung et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2019). Vish described avoiding visits from his son due to the shame and embarrassment:

> Last time my son wanted to visit me, I was begging him 'No please don't come. Please don't visit dad.' That affects me and my son as well. Because I didn't want my son to see this kind of a place. But the council, they don't think about my son. Nobody thinks, how will this place affect my family or son or whatever.

Vish's account, like Sid's, shows how the material inadequacies of a space seep into the temporalities of daily life – shaping when men choose to stay in or leave the flat, who they allow to visit, and how much energy they can devote to work, recovery, or parenting. Far from being a neutral backdrop, the physical conditions of housing actively shape the small, everyday choices through which men attempt to practise desistance, infusing everyday practices, like seeing one's children, with serious risk calculation. Short review cycles and notice periods compounded the material depravity, as men postponed buying basics, avoided investing in the space, and lived with a readiness to move.

Finally, short-term and review-laden accommodation produced suspended time and a sense of precarity.[21] Many placements were explicitly short-term or probationary, with residents subject to review and removal at short notice. Without permanence, stability, or security, these settings communicated to residents that their foothold was contingent and revocable – conditions that undermine the very sense of belonging, temporal continuity, and routine that desistance depends upon. This temporal instability left many men feeling suspended in time: unable to invest in their surroundings, plan beyond the next inspection, or imagine a settled future. Their everyday decisions were shaped not only by place but by the knowledge that the place itself could be taken away. Stability builds slowly, but the clock was institutional — tenure ended on the council's timetable, not when men had found their footing. The lottery-like timing of offers and the certainty of expiry demanded constant temporal recalibration and the emotional labour of staying packed, delaying commitments, and rationing hope.

In sum, the men's experiences of council and supported housing reveal that these placements, though intended as stabilising, often reproduced the very conditions they were meant to resolve. Spatially tethered to familiar environments, bound by relocation rules, and undermined by poor material quality and short-term tenures, these settings offered little sense of permanence or possibility. Here, 'being housed' looked like success on paper but withheld stability: when the scaffold is short-tenured and revocable, investment, routine, and recovery cannot take hold.

Within these placements, the work of desistance was refracted through ongoing, day-to-day struggles against the quiet degradations of inadequate, insecure and impermanent housing. For men exiting prison, these forms of precarious housing reproduce what Giordano et al. (2002) term 'hooks for change' in reverse: instead of offering safety and support the housing produces the very same conditions of threat and instability the men were trying to leave behind. These disadvantages manifested chronopolitically: shaping how men

[21] Tenancies in England also fare worse than those across Europe. English tenancies have been found to be less secure and stable than those across much of Europe (Scanlon et al., 2015).

spend their time, what routines they can create, what they are left waiting for, and how they imagine their present and future.

4.2.3 Carceral Housing: Supervised Resettlement

Men leaving prison do not step into a landscape of unmediated freedom. As explored in Chapter 3, resettlement is always monitored and negotiated through probation oversight, where progress is measured and infractions punished. But in the first months of release – amidst structural traps and fragile housing options – this supervision takes on a sharper edge. It is not only that men must build new routines in environments saturated with risks; they must do so while subject to systems designed to detect and sanction every slip. Here, timing becomes governance: curfews to the minute, sign-in windows, unannounced checks, and even scarcely available scaffolding comes with surveillance. The experience of supervision manifests chronopolitically: it structures daily time-use and renders desistance a moment-to-moment practice of keeping pace with institutional timetables and expectation.

For many, resettlement under these conditions meant living with a pervasive sense of being monitored. Weekly probation meetings, regular drug tests, and the requirement to evidence appointments or work-search activities created ample opportunity for misstep, or "traps" as some men called it. Here, compliance was a timetable, not a trajectory. A late return, a missed meeting, or an unapproved overnight stay could trigger recall to custody. These were not abstract possibilities; they were daily calculations that shaped how men planned and lived their lives. In these conditions, the work of desistance was refracted through a constant performance of compliance. The emotional labour of keeping time was uninterruptedly felt: anticipating checks, narrating absences with paperwork, and aligning bodies in pain with clocks that would not pause.

For a smaller subset of men in this study (11 of the 150), residence was a condition of release. Some men were required, by license, to take up specific accommodation for a fixed period of time. These were known

as ‘Approved Premises’ (APs), where residence is itself a condition of parole. As of 2016, there were 101 APs across England and Wales, providing roughly 2,000 residential spaces (Reeves, 2016) for those medium- and high-risk prison leavers with residence conditions on release. APs exemplify what Pemberton (2014) terms the ‘carceral continuum’ – spaces that extend the logic of custody into the community. Imposing intensive measures of control such as curfews, room checks, thrice-daily sign-ins, alarms, and surveillance (Reeves, 2016) meant that the rhythms of everyday life were structured around regulation and discipline. In Approved Premises, shelter came tied to an unforgiving, audited schedule that stripped men of temporal autonomy, denying them control over their days and the pace of resettlement. Designed as sites intended to support rehabilitation while exercising precautionary supervision over high-risk prison-leavers (HMIP & HMI Probation, 2008), APs have been examined for their role in shaping transitions from custody to community (Irwin-Rogers, 2017; Davies & O’Meara, 2018; Bruce et al., 2017; Cordwell, 2020). The most recent joint inspection by the HM Inspectorates (2008) found that whilst APs carried out their ‘control’ function to a high standard, the ‘help’ and ‘change’ functions were underperforming.

The carceral logic extended beyond surveillance to the curtailment of temporal autonomy through enforced immobilisation. Rigid schedules and operational restrictions in APs superseded residents’ own timetables, impeding their ability to organise daily life. Prosocial engagements—employment, treatment, family contact, care—were deferred, truncated, or relegated to residual intervals in order to meet sign-in windows, room checks, and testing. With thrice-daily sign-ins, men described standard employment as unfeasible (some resorted to informal or illicit work to reconcile compliance with subsistence), while mandatory curfews routinely conflicted with doctors’ appointments, Jobcentre visits, and addiction support sessions.

More fundamentally, men lost the temporal freedom to design their days and, with it, the capacity to design their desistance. Under AP regimes, desistance could be practised only in the register of compliance – keeping time, evidencing presence, avoiding breach – rather than through self-directed routines that build work, care, recovery, and prosocial ties. The emotional labour of keeping time – anticipating inspections, documenting absences, calibrating movements to narrow windows – became a daily occupation. This loss

of temporal autonomy seeded fragility that accumulates across weeks and months and, as Chapters 6 and 7 show, underwrites later drift once time-bound scaffolds expire. As Ollie, who had just begun his third week at his AP, explained:

> I can't work. I can't see my kids. I can't even go apply for Universal Credit at the job centre. Even sitting here with you now at this café, my heart is racing… I have this terrible fear I'll come home to police sending me back to prison for being late.

Ollie's description captures how carceral supervision saturates the micro-temporalities of everyday life: even mundane tasks such as attending appointments or seeing children become high-stakes calculations under threat of recall. Rehabilitation, whilst encouraged, felt 'suspended in time' while men felt they had no choice but to "wait-out" their time in APs before being able to practice desistance of their own design.

Moreover, these forms of supervised housing did not simply 'suspend' men's rehabilitation, temporarily, they actively worked against it, by embedding them in environments thick with criminogenic cues and reputational histories. Because placements were often local, men found themselves sharing space with former co-defendants and gang rivals. While in social housing, this could be assumed; in APs, it was guaranteed. This meant APs amplified rather than mitigated exposure to criminal networks. This meant that APs, like the stigmatised estates described above, embedded men in what we previously defined as 'structural traps' (Sampson & Loeffler, 2010) – amplifying rather than mitigating exposure to risk, conflict and criminality.

Whilst the men in my sample spent their time pre-release desperately awaiting any news of accommodation offers and places to stay upon release, being notified they would be housed by an AP was never the news they were hoping to receive. For the men in this study, AP placement rarely signified support. Instead, it layered additional carceral controls onto an already precarious transition, constraining agency through hyper-surveillance, limited mobility, and enforced proximity to criminogenic networks. In short, APs often reproduced the very dynamics of institutionalisation that desistance research urges us to disrupt – operating less as bridges to the community than cages within it. Such settings meant that men were not only navigating structural traps – negative influences, precarious housing, poverty, stigma – but doing so under the weight

of a system designed to punish failure rather than nurture change. The paradox was clear: men were tasked with building new, prosocial identities in spaces that were over-controlled yet under-protected.

Whether men were housed in APs or subject to other strict licence conditions, 'supervised resettlement' characterised every man's experience, albeit to varying degrees. It layered surveillance and sanction – curfews, checks, sign-ins – onto already-scarce scaffolds of support. Desistance, then, was less a matter of linear progress than of endurance on institutional time: progress had to be performed on schedule and evidenced, with minor slips legible as breach. This is the distinctive contribution of APs in the chapter's argument: where 4.2.1 shows scarcity and delay, and 4.2.2 shows short, insecure tenure, 4.2.3 shows support present *as checkpoint* – the scaffold carries the surveillance. The next section turns to the boundary case: when no scaffold arrives at all and enforcement becomes the only clock that runs.

4.2.4 Survival under Zero Scaffold

When scaffolding did not arrive, the men were not just robbed of accommodation or income, they were robbed of desistance by their own design. Chronopolitically, their time was no longer their own, as they navigated life paced by enforcement: street-level policing, recall risk, and the criminalisation of survival. In a setting of minute-to-minute survival, men are unable to dream, imagine or plan for a future. Their timelines are truncated, and they operate entirely in the present. Absent scaffolding, disadvantage manifested chronopolitically: futures were foreshortened, agency over timing ceded, and desistance practised only as moment-to-moment negotiation in a landscape saturated with risk. Temporally, desistance was not achieved through a steady, forward-moving tempo, but a fragile, recursive and liminal one.

Men reported leaving prison carrying intentions, hopes, and commitments to do differently. But for the majority of men in this study, release from prison did not lead to a home, it led to the street. And those intentions, hopes and commitments, then, had to be forged within, and immediately tested by, the conditions described above. The first month after release was not simply a static attempt to 'go straight'; instead,

desistance took the form of micro-level trade-offs: weighing which risks to tolerate, which relationships to endure, which compromises to make in order to get through each day. Men were not abandoning desistance when they made these calculations; they were practising it under constraint.

For the majority in this study, these calculations began with homelessness. Of the 150 individuals supported by RESTART, 127 were released without fixed accommodation, and 91 experienced street homelessness for at least one night during the 18-month study. For some, this lasted only a few days whilst they awaited a temporary housing offer; for others, it stretched across the entire duration of fieldwork.

Rough sleeping imposed not just material deprivation but intense physical, psychological and chronopolitical harm. Physically and psychologically, research consistently shows higher prevalence of respiratory diseases, dental problems, headaches, skin diseases and anxiety among rough sleepers when compared to the general public (Homeless Link, 2014; Keogh et al., 2015; Brett et al., 2014; Bines, 1994; Beijer et al., 2016). Lewer et al. (2019) find significantly higher prevalence of asthma, bronchitis, epilepsy, heart problems including heart attack, angina, murmur or abnormal heart rhythms, stroke and diabetes amongst the rough sleeping population – with rough sleepers being three times more likely to report a chronic disease than those in stable housing. And for men with a history of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – as many participants in my sample self-reported – rough sleeping often amplified existing harm (Theodorou & Johnsen, 2017). Temporally, homelessness, of all forms, inflicted chronopolitical harm: hours were requisitioned by queues, service windows and patrol cycles – time was no longer one's own. Time was not *lived* but organised as logistics: queuing for food and showers, walking long distances within narrow service windows, and timing movements to avoid police attention. Support was indeterminate ("we'll let you know"), while sanctions were punctual ("you missed your slot"). In this time poverty, futures were foreshortened: men could not design their desistance beyond the next bed, the next meal, the next morning.

As men practiced desistance under constraint, the cumulative toll of street homelessness created conditions where individuals become markedly more susceptible to desperation-driven decision-making. Daily

rhythms are reduced to micro-level choices: where to sleep, whom to trust, and what risks to take in exchange for shelter. And under the physical and psychological strain of rough sleeping, these choices became high-stakes risk calculations. In that calculus, substance use can emerge not as recreation but as *coping*: when rough sleeping, substance use became a means of enduring the night (Kidd, 2004; McCay & Aiello, 2013). Kevin described it as: making "the concrete bed a little softer, the biting cold a little warmer, and the abuse a little less painful." Joan, repeatedly released homeless despite his epilepsy, called it "self-medicat[ing]". Yet when it comes to substance abuse, the line between coping and collapse is thin: accidental overdose remains a leading cause of death among people experiencing homelessness (Beijer et al., 2011).

Another strategy was 'sofa surfing', but this form of homelessness came with its own harms. Sofa surfing is the most widespread and under-recognised form of homelessness in England – frequently excluded from statistics and, by extension, from support (Gaetz et al., 2014; Minich et al., 2011; Elwell-Sutton et al., 2017). Estimates suggest sofa surfing affects eight times more people than rough sleeping (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021; Wilson & Barton, 2022). Defined as staying temporarily with friends, family, or acquaintances without long-term security or formal tenancy, sofa surfing reflects a form of 'permanent impermanence' (McCoy & Hug, 2016) – a state of constant contingency and lack of control. For some of the men in this study, sofa surfing also meant returning to familiar but harmful environments. Xavier described the impossible bind of relying on his old network:

> This is not a group I should be involved with. And I know that, I know that. But I've been homeless since I got released from prison four-and-a-half weeks ago. When you've got nowhere to go, and you're desperate, it's really challenging *not* to go to these guys, even if I know it means getting involved in the wrong crowd.

Even when men were not directly engaging in risky behaviours, their vulnerability made them easy targets for coercion or exploitation. This vulnerability was only further intensified by the economic precarity, social isolation, and limited support structures at the point of release. And, tragically, it is precisely this desperation – for food, for money, for somewhere to call home – that rendered the men such easy targets. A striking majority reported abuse, blackmail, or conditional offers of housing. Christian had all his savings stolen;

Timo was persuaded to list his friend's address for his benefits payments; Myles was coerced to work within an organised drug supply network; and Kyle was staying at a 'cuckooed' property[22] and sworn to secrecy. Coercion and manipulation can take on many forms, but in every case, vulnerability was the currency. For men released with little support and money, any offer of shelter – no matter how damaging – became viable.

Nowhere did this seem more profound than TJ's story. After spending several nights rough sleeping, he would engage in casual sexual relationships to secure a bed or a sofa for the night. While he recounted these experiences with humour – chalking it up to being a "hustler" – scholars such as Bowen (2021) argue that the exchange of sex for shelter or basic survival needs, though frequently minimised or normalised by those involved, constitutes a precarious and exploitative form of transactional survival. In *Work, Money and Duality: Trading Sex as a Side Hustle,* Bowen (2021) situates this behaviour within a broader pattern of risky coping strategies used by individuals facing acute financial insecurity and homelessness.

As with APs and state housing, sofa surfing also undermined efforts to avoid old networks. Men knew that distancing themselves from negative influences was key to desistance – but when survival depended on proximity, those lines blurred: "I know I'm going backwards," Xavier told me, "but I can't sleep on the street again." Consequently, when presented with the immediate prospect of shelter – such as the offer of accommodation on a friend's couch – individuals may be cognitively and emotionally ill-equipped to rigorously assess the quality of the social relationship or the suitability of the environment. Desperation dulled discernment. Many reported returning to abusive ex-partners, drug-using relatives, or co-defendants from previous offences. Some admitted to re-entering criminal activity just to keep a roof over their head. Others were left feeling retraumatised, silently enduring what they had once escaped. The damage was not only material. Sofa surfing stripped men of autonomy, security, and control. One man described it as "being trapped in someone else's story" – a liminal existence where nothing belonged to you, and any misstep could send you back to the street. In such precarious conditions, the capacity to focus on desistance – or

[22] Cuckooing is a practice where people take over a vulnerable person's home and use the property to deal, store or take drugs, facilitate sex work, as a place for them to live, or to financially abuse the tenant (Home Office, 2025).

even to plan beyond the day – was routinely overwhelmed by the need to manage risk, navigate power dynamics, and avoid eviction.

Amid an undetermined and uncertain future, every night became a higher-stakes decision: find shelter in dangerous company, risk arrest to gain re-entry into custody, or endure the street and its attendant dangers. Several participants suggested that self-harm or minor criminal acts could be tactical — 'strategies' to secure accommodation via hospitalisation or re-incarceration when rough sleeping became unbearable. Some, like Ant, or Ron in Chapter 3, spoke openly about the possibility of reoffending as a deliberate tactic: a constrained exertion of agency to secure warmth and food when other options had collapsed. For these men, administrative waiting was indefinite, whilst sanctions remained punctual; for some, recall became the only temporal certainty — a constrained exertion of autonomy over their futures, rather than a deficit of intent. These accounts do not reflect an absence of motivation but the collapse of viable options: desistance as intention, persistence as survival.

These daily negotiations reveal that desistance, in this first month, was not a single decision but a fragile, ongoing practice performed within hostile conditions and truncated timelines. Intentions to desist persisted but were continually tested against the pressures of survival and the absence of meaningful scaffolding. The men's accounts show a constant, exhausting balancing act: carving out a new identity while tethered to old networks, pursuing stability while immersed in instability, resisting relapse while surrounded by its triggers, and trying to design their own desistance whilst unable to see beyond the next meal or next bed. In this sense, desistance was not abandoned but practiced — moment by moment — under conditions that rendered each decision a high-stakes negotiation. To desist in such circumstances was itself a significant achievement: not just an expression of motivation, but an act of endurance amidst systemic neglect and structural traps. Intent alone was not enough. Early outcomes hinged on contingency and timing: who picked up the phone, who opened the door, who had space on their sofa. In the absence of stable scaffolding, success became as much about luck as it was about effort.

Where no scaffold arrived, time was consumed by subsistence: days were requisitioned by queues, opening hours and long walks; futures were foreshortened, and planning contracted to the next meal, the next bed, the next morning. Some men timed a return to custody as a constrained route to warmth or care; others negotiated the present at the micro-scale—rationing risk hour by hour. The contribution of 4.2.4 is to show desistance practised as minute-to-minute survival under truncated horizons, not as a steady forward tempo. The complete lack of scaffolding meant men's temporal autonomy collapsed: planning extended no further than hours ahead, rendering desistance an exercise in immediate survival rather than forward movement.

4.3CONCLUSION

The Ministry of Justice reports that one in three prison-leavers are recalled to custody within the first month of release; in this study it was closer to 40%. The statistic is well known – frequently cited in reports and policy debates – yet remains abstracted from the human actors that shape it. This chapter evidences this phenomenon on the scale of lived, everyday negotiation. It traced how late or absent housing, structural squeeze, and ongoing penal oversight fracture the very conditions desistance requires.

Desistance, at this stage, appeared as a series of negotiations: *Where will I sleep tonight? Who can I ask? What can I eat for under £1.50 these days? How cold is it going to be tonight? Do I need a blanket? Will I be safe?* These are not simply logistical challenges; they are the temporal and material context within which choices about risk, restraint, and self-preservation are made. While the question of w*hether to desist or persist* may not be explicitly considered, in subtle and persistent ways, it lingers behind every question above. *To desist or not desist?* Or better yet, to desist – *but for how long? Until night 5 on the street? Until the money runs out? Until the first assault outside the hostel, or the first night back with an abusive ex-partner?* These were the fragile boundaries against which desistance was tested in the first month.

Across council flats, APs, pavements, and sofas, men like TJ, Ant and Riley remind us that the will to desist was not in short supply; it was the conditions into which that will was released that proved unsustainable.

The first month—far from consolidating progress—was marked by reversals, emotional disorientation, and structural precarity. Institutional time governed: arrivals were late or uneven, tenures short, and support audited; sanctions, by contrast, were punctual. For some, the only timetable that could be made predictable was the carceral one—*recall* as a constrained exertion of agency when other routes collapsed.

These findings complicate some of the core assumptions embedded within dominant desistance frameworks. Identity work, 'redemptive scripts' (Maruna, 2001) and 'cognitive transformations' (Giordano et al., 2002) cannot be sustained under bridges, in unsafe hostels, or amid short-stay tenures that expire on schedule. The first month reveals desistance's dependence on infrastructure and time: motivation alone is insufficient when the strongest drivers of persistence are desperation, exhaustion, and survival. These findings echo recent calls in criminology to centre structural contexts – not as background noise to individual choice, but as co-producing forces in the process of desistance (McNeill, 2016; Farrall et al., 2014). The early stage of release is not a blank slate; it is an index of accumulated disadvantage and misaligned clocks.

4.2.1 evidenced scarcity and administrative waiting at the moment where support is most needed. 4.2.2 demonstrated how short, conditional and insecure tenures – often in criminogenic environments – produce fragile, time-limited beginnings and reshape daily time-use. 4.2.3 analysed Approved Premises as shelter attached to an audited timetable, curtailing temporal autonomy and rendering 'support' a checkpoint. 4.2.4 traced the boundary case of zero scaffold, where time is consumed by subsistence and horizons are foreshortened; desistance is practised minute-to-minute under survival time. Taken together, the chapter shows desistance in the first month as improvised rather than planned, performed on others' schedules rather than one's own, and rendered fragile by truncated horizons. In short, material, social and geographic disadvantage took a chronopolitical form—structuring time, constraining routines, assigning waiting, and foreshortening imagined futures. Temporal autonomy collapsed; planning extended no further than hours ahead, rendering desistance an exercise in immediate survival rather than forward movement.

While Chapters 2-4 showed a fast, audited tempo that many men struggled to match, Chapter 5 follows with the opposite problem. In The Long Run, as men come off license, the institutional tempo slows, oversight disappears, and time-bound scaffolding withdraws, leaving some men to experience temporal 'drift' in 'open time'. Desistance, then, becomes a question not just of *keeping* pace but of *setting* it.

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5 INTRODUCTION

In Chapters 2–4 the pace was fast and unforgiving: curfews to the minute, inspection windows, recall thresholds. Men kept time to others' schedules, improvising survival under short horizons. This chapter turns to what follows when those clocks stop. Probation licenses end[23]; inspections cease; the calendar clears. The result is not simply relief. For many, it is open time – hours unassigned, days unscaffolded – experienced not as freedom but as drift, emptiness, or purposelessness.

By the time men reached the 3–17-month period covered in this chapter, the cohort had already thinned markedly. As Figure 1 in 1.1.2 shows, many had experienced at least one recall or remand; others had moved, disengaged from RESTART, or become intermittently unreachable. The longitudinal material here therefore reflects a subset of the original 150 who remained in the community long enough to build some routines – often moving in and out of contact along the way – together with fieldwork on men who resurfaced after periods of custody or disappearance. The three extended vignettes in the descriptive section were selected because they capture recurring patterns in the wider cohort: fragile stability under conditional scaffolding, apparent momentum that unravels after setbacks, and the institutional labour involved in tracking men whose lives remain on the edge of supervision.

This middle stretch of resettlement, between 3 and 17 months after release, marks a distinctive phase in the resettlement process. By this point, many men had passed the most visible tests of early release: they had complied with probation, secured housing, avoided reoffending, and in most cases come off their license. Outwardly, they appeared stable. Yet the challenges of sustaining change over the long haul had only just begun. The urgency of early release had faded, but what replaced it was not stability so much as a slower kind of fragility: boredom, fatigue, the draining persistence of old networks, and the quiet disorientation of unstructured days.

[23] Most men in this study were on short licenses of 2-12 months.

Here, desistance is no longer audited; it must be designed. Men had to *set* as well as *keep* the pace: assembling routines around work, care, and community; negotiating time with family, employers and peers rather than with probation; and creating anchors that held beyond the next deadline. Temporal autonomy, long pursued, could initially destabilise – what had been a rush of activity in the first month now gave way to a lull that demanded new rhythms. Success in this phase depended on whether men could convert open time into owned time through the accumulation of repeatable anchors.

The chapter opens with narrative vignettes that capture how this period was lived and felt. These stories do not chart dramatic relapse or spectacular redemption, but the quieter tensions of the long run: the erosion of support, the exhaustion of unmet goals, the unravelling of routines. They reveal how desistance is not a single turning point or fixed time point but an extended, uncertain process, shaped as much by drift and emptiness as by intent or crisis.

The analytic discussion that follows develops these insights across four strands. First, 5.2.1 considers the timing of challenges, showing how threats to desistance emerged in distinct tempos across months rather than all at once. Second, 5.2.2 examines open versus owned time, focusing on how scaffolds and anchors – routines, family ties, and sobriety practices – steadied weeks and gave structure to days. Third, 5.2.3 highlights the design labour required to hold time steady: the quiet, repetitive work of sustaining routines, sobriety, and relationships. Finally, 5.2.4 turns to empty time and drift, arguing that once early milestones are met and external clocks fall silent, men often confront post-marker emptiness – a condition where time itself feels stalled.

This chapter explores how the work of desisting became inseparable from the work of structuring time when official clocks no longer dictated the pace. Short-term scaffolding produced alignment with institutional tempos, but its expiry created a temporal vacuum. The problem of the long run is therefore one of temporal drift: with external clocks silenced, desistance became contingent on whether men could create, repeat, and sustain their own rhythms – and on how they managed the risks that surfaced when time no longer belonged to probation but to the men themselves.

5.1 DESCRIPTION

The following vignettes trace men's trajectories beyond the initial sprint of resettlement. In this longer stretch – six, twelve, even eighteen months after release – many had achieved the milestones imagined inside: housing secured, probation completed, income earned, routines beginning to hold. Outwardly, these markers signalled stability. But beneath them lay deeper uncertainties. Once the scaffolding of probation's calendar fell away, new challenges surfaced: intrusion from old networks, the weight of unmet goals, and the quiet erosion of contact.

Each vignette highlights a different face of this problem. The Golden Ticket (5.1.1) shows how the 'golden tickets' of housing, work, and stable income carried vulnerabilities of their own, exposing men to old contacts and forcing them to seek out alternative anchors. Everything but the Job (5.1.2) shows how employment, framed as the anchor that would validate change, failed to materialise on an expected timeline, creating drift even as other scaffolds remained in place. 'Bounty Hunting' (5.1.3) captures what happens when scaffolds vanish altogether: men disappear into empty time, their days unmarked by anchors, leaving only fragments for staff to chase.

Together, these vignettes show how the end of licence left men with open time – long mornings, drifting nights, and empty hours – and how desistance depended on whether that time could be converted into owned time. While Joey and Aakesh illustrate the conditions that led men toward drift, the final vignette zooms in on drift itself: what it looks like when scaffolds thin, when weeks unravel, and when men slip out of rhythm. Disappearance here is not defiance but a symptom – evidence of time unstructured, routines dissolved, and the quiet pull of days without anchors.

5.1.1 The Golden Ticket

When I first met Joey in prison, he spoke often about what he called his ‘golden ticket.’ *“If I can just get a flat, a job, and money coming in, I’ll be golden.”* He repeated it over canteen tea, on the landing, in the holding room before a probation meeting. The three items were always the same: A flat meant a front door that locked. A job meant mornings that started themselves. Money meant rent paid on time, food in the cupboard, and fewer reasons to answer old calls. “That’s all I want,” he said. “Those three and I’ll be alright.” He pictured himself finishing a shift, taking the bus home, cooking for himself, sleeping through the night. Routine as proof. Routine as protection.

Other men spoke the same language. On the wing, ‘stability’ was a shared fantasy: a small place, steady money, regular hours. The golden ticket sounded individual, but it belonged to a wider script – probation priorities, housing criteria, resettlement paperwork. Joey had absorbed that script and made it his own. “You get those three, you’re set,” he told a friend. “You’re not asking for much.”

On release, Joey set about chasing the ticket. The first weeks were long and plain. He queued at the council office, took a number, and watched the screen roll through names. He sat in a surgery waiting room for a repeat prescription, spoke to a pharmacist who knew him by first name only, not by past. He waited on hold to correct a Universal Credit error, wrote down reference codes on the back of an envelope. He showed up to probation on time, took the slow bus across town, carrying bank letters, printed forms, and a calendar with pencilled appointments with him. “Keeping my head down,” he called it. He was filling the day until his golden tickets arrived.

Month three, some things began to stick. A temporary room became a short-term tenancy. The prescription stabilised his nights. The benefit payment arrived when it was meant to. By month six, he had keys he could hold up and call his own. A month after that, a warehouse took him on for early shifts. *“*I felt like I’d landed

on my feet," he remembered. "First proper job in a long time." He sent a photo of his first payslip to his brother. The message underneath was three words: "One step closer."

For a few weeks the days arranged themselves. Joey woke before the alarm, made toast, left the flat while it was still dark. He liked the walk to the bus stop – the same faces, the same dog tied outside the corner shop. He learned which supervisors were worth avoiding, which ones accepted a quiet nod. On Fridays, he stood in line with the others, card in hand, pay hitting the account a little after lunchtime. "I thought I'd cracked it," he said. "My golden ticket."

Then the knocking started. "Once I got that first paycheck, they started to come looking for me." Old contacts saw him on the street in his hi-vis, clocked his bus times, and learned the hour he got home. They knew the address from before. The flat that was supposed to be safety became a point of entry. "That's the worst bit," he said. "The knocking on my door. Day and night." When he didn't answer the door, they'd start knocking at his windows.

"You doing anything right now?" someone would ask in the doorway, already stepping inside. A cigarette lit itself in his kitchen. A request for a "bit of dough" stretched into a story about a debt, then into a plan that needed his car, his name, his time. "You feel trapped in that cycle," Joey said. "They come in, they sit, and before you know it, they're smoking and then you're out doing something. It makes me not want to be home."

These intrusions steadily eroded Joey's routine. What had looked like a steady rhythm dissolved into drift: away from owned time to unstructured, open time. The hours after work – once partly occupied by probation check-ins and other conditions – were now exposed, absorbed by the demands of others, pulling him back toward old networks and relapse, and slowly undoing the desistance work he had built. "Bad influences and networks must be the number one reason for reoffending," he told me, then said it again, more firmly, as if practice could make it true. The scaffolding was not holding. The very achievements he had worked for

(flat, job, income) – his golden ticket – carried their own vulnerabilities. The flat made him findable. The income made him useful. The job made him visible on the street. These were not day-one crises; they surfaced later, months in, after license conditions had thinned, the calendar had cleared, and hard work had materialised. “I thought I’d be safe once I got them,” he said. “It was the opposite.”

He talked about the neighbourhood. About the smashed window last time he said no. About the council letter that offered him the same area again, because that is where the list sent people “like him”. About the feeling of being watched by nobody and everybody. “I’m not safe anywhere,” he had said on the car ride home from the gate. Back then, he meant streets — postcodes where danger waited. Now, he meant time itself: the long hours after work, no longer filled by probation or appointments, were open to intrusion.

The decision arrived simply. “The only way for me would be to move,” he said, almost to himself. “If I stay here, in this area, surrounded by all the same contacts, I’m going to struggle to stay out of it.” He didn’t frame it as a plan; more of a modest possibility like his golden ticket had once been. But just like golden ticket, he pursued it with unflinching resolve. A week later, he asked his brother. “I didn’t expect it, but he said yes.” The next day he took his tenancy letter to probation and asked whether giving up the flat would put him in breach. “It’s the same council boundary,” he explained, “It should be fine.” He moved with two bags and a kettle. The flat – rare, hard-won, enviable – went back into the system. From the outside, it looked like a loss: independence traded for dependence, adulthood reduced to a spare room. For Joey, it was the first quiet week he’d had in months.

Life with his brother did not make a story. He woke when he heard feet in the hallway. He made tea in the kitchen that wasn’t only his. He took turns buying milk. He ate at the same time most evenings, because that is when the kitchen filled with steam and sound. He watched television on a couch that had crumbs in the corner. He argued once about whose turn it was to take the bin out. He apologised by making toast for two. He talked before work and after it, about the bus, about a supervisor who was “on one,” about a pair of shoes he couldn’t quite afford. The difference was not dramatic. It was ordinary. A morning shout down

the hallway – *"*You up?*"* – that functioned as an alarm. Tea cooling on the counter because somebody else had made it. The small friction of living with another person that, paradoxically, smoothed the day. The routine wrote itself: work, bus, front step, kettle, plate, washing-up, sleep.

I joined him one evening on his walk from the bus stop. He pointed out the shortcut he'd started using to avoid a corner where he felt watched. He showed me the shop where he bought the same bread each week. "I don't go the other way anymore," he said. "This way's fine." He talked about money not as a secret to be kept from others but as a budget: rent contribution, phone, a small amount set aside for a football top he would probably not buy. At the end of the month his phone lit up less and his door went quiet. He missed a call from a number he used to answer and did not call back. He wrote down his rota and stuck it to the fridge. He slept. "It's no golden ticket," he said once, shrugging, "but it holds."

In our last meeting I couldn't help but wonder: *Whose* golden ticket had it been in those early days anyways? Joey had wanted what everyone had wanted, what everyone was told to want. The list he carried out of prison—flat, job, income—was a script he inherited from institutions that needed proof of stability. But *proof* of stability and the *experience* of it did not arrive on the same clock. The scaffolds men imagine as stabilising arrived late and brought their own conditions: visibility, intrusion, the slow pull back into other people's time. Routine stabilises when it is lived, not listed – when it's chosen, not imposed. Joey's story shows what this chapter argues in small: that scaffolds can expose as well as support; that some challenges do not appear until late; that the work of keeping going is quiet, ordinary, and patient.

5.1.2 Everything but the Job

Unlike some of the other men I met, employment wasn't just a distant ambition to Aakesh – it was the spine of his strategy for rebuilding his "dream life". Employment, for him, was not one scaffold among many but *the* scaffold that would hold the rest. That sense of having something to offer – of being ready to contribute

– mattered deeply to him. Even months before his release, he spoke with clarity about the steps he needed to take:

> So when I first got arrested, I was like, 'right, this is what I'm going to do': 'I'm going to go and do the courses and use the time inside to get more skilled'. But when I got to Bullingdon, they said the woodwork and carpentry courses were finished. It stripped a lot of my confidence. I was thinking: 'when I get released, if I've only got tiling – who's gonna want just a tiler'?

As his release date approached, and he'd learned he'd secured housing, Aakesh outlined his remaining goals for his supported re-entry: "Employment next. And that's it."

"So now that you've secured housing, employment is your next step?"

"Yeah. In a perfect situation, four months or five months from now I'd be working. I'd be content. I'd have the money to be able to do nice things. I'd be able to support my kids."

"What would supporting your kids look like, to you?" His RESTART worker had asked.

"I want to get back into their lives. I've got three and one on the way. When I'm in prison or in probation hostels, I can't do anything for them. But this time, with work, I can."

Before his RESTART worker or I had even realized it, Aakesh had been subtly raising the stakes for his gaining employment even from within the prison. Already, before release, the timeline was set: employment within five months, family reintegration soon after. These were not simply his aspirations but reflected a wider institutional script – the probation mantra that housing, work, and family equal stability. Aakesh had absorbed that timetable and made it his own.

Aakesh's transition into the community had been smooth, he was housed, he had existing support networks and scaffolding. He was level-headed and driven. He had some savings from before his time in prison that could float him for a few months. All that remained for him to do was to find a job, like he'd always planned. Over the next several months, he submitted application after application to no avail. "The job market is really brutal these days" or "bad luck" we'd say, trying to keep his spirits lifted.

By application 14, he'd landed an interview. With his relevant skills, he'd applied to work as a mechanic for a major car manufacturer. The week before, his RESTART worker and I had taken him to a local charity to find him something to wear for his interview. He rehearsed his answers with us. He had a prepared answer for how to broach *the* 'criminal record question'. He had his interview Thursday morning. He found out on the spot that he didn't get the job. When we next saw him, he told us what had happened:

"There were 500 applicants narrowed down to five for the interviews. Three of them didn't turn up. And I still didn't get the job."

"Really? Did they offer any feedback?"

"Yeah, purely because of this." Aakesh pulled his phone out and googled his own name. A series of articles regarding his offending history appeared.

"That's the first thing on Google. They told me 'We can't afford to have you working here'."

"They actually told you that?"

"Yeah, and I said, 'have you given the other person the job then?' and they're like 'No'. So good luck to them, going through the other 500 applicants then. Because from 500, to five, really to two, because the others didn't turn up, and they're still sending me out the door.

"I'm so sorry."

"And I asked them 'so why did you even ask me for the interview?' and they said, 'Because you've got all the credentials, that we need.' Isn't that ridiculous."

The candour of the rejection was striking: employment was presented as both within his grasp ("all the credentials") and permanently out of reach ("because of *that*"). We tried to comfort Aakesh, and reassure him that he'd find another, more suitable, employer. But by application 14 he was beginning to feel worn down.

> It's just, for someone who has had everything stripped away from them, it gives them something. It gives them that responsibility and goes, 'You know what, you can be a human again. You can be an adult. You can be who you want to be again.'

Here his language revealed the weight he'd placed on employment: it was not only about income or supporting his children, but about recognition – proof of adulthood, humanity, and worth. That symbolic load made work both more precious and more fragile. Whether this evaluation was imposed by institutions or not, he seemed to believe it – carrying an inherited script as though it were his own.

> I was a class-A user, I've had to retrain my reward system. The reward system is a big thing. It goes for every walk of life, it doesn't have to be drugs. It's like, if you give someone who has nothing *something*, they will cherish that something. It's like giving someone a diamond bottle and says, 'this is yours, all you gotta do is keep to the rules', of course they'll listen. It gives them something to work towards. Employment is my diamond bottle. I want a job like I want that diamond bottle.

The metaphor of the "diamond bottle" dramatised the point: employment became his imagined anchor, the reward system reset. But his comparison obscured how fragile the scaffold was: unlike a prescription, housing placement, or probation meeting, employment was not guaranteed or repeatable. It was subject to stigma, the labour market, and his own criminal record. It was therefore the most unstable scaffold to hinge his identity on. Between application 15 and 25, he'd landed a few other interviews, but to no avail.

> Everyone's so stigmatised. You can go to jail for, I don't know, ripping a bit of wallpaper off the wall in the shop and the interviewers will say 'hmm*'* – that's where the not feeling human part comes into it. People always say, 'leave the past in the past', so why now, when I've left my past in the past, is everybody else using it against me? They always say: 'Oh, you've been to prison?' – Yeah, and? I've learned my lesson. If I hadn't, I'd still be there.

By failed application 26, the motivated man who told us he'd support his family because he knew he'd get work, was gone. All that remained now was a man who had rested too much of his self-image on his employment status and as a result felt, as he'd put it himself, less than human. At the start of his resettlement, with housing secured, he'd quit drugs, he hadn't reoffended, he had kept his place tidy and avoided troublesome people and places.

But by month 10, and rejection 29, he had his first failed drugs test, he stopped showing up to our scheduled meetings, and he withdrew from his children. By this stage, he had begun to drift: the steady

scaffolds of housing, sobriety, and routine eroded under the weight of one absent piece. Desistance wasn't undone in week one, but in month 10, under the tempo of perceived stalled forward motion.

By rejection 35, Aakesh was gone. He didn't answer his phone. He missed his next probation appointment.

In his last conversation with us before we'd lost contact, he made it explicitly clear: "It's not even about the money," he said. "It's about feeling like I'm going somewhere. Like I'm building something. I've been doing everything right and it's like… nothing's happening."

The irony was that a lot *was* happening — scaffolds were in place, progress was visible. But because employment had not arrived on his expected schedule, Aakesh experienced it as nothing happening. He felt slowed by late employment, convinced he should have secured it by now. But whose timeline was he working against: probation's, the labour market's, or his own internalised clock of redemption? It was in this misalignment that drift took hold. Aakesh didn't fall apart because of relapse or rejection alone, but because he'd built his future on the belief that redemption meant employment. When that vision stalled, the symbolic weight he'd placed on 'doing well' – and the narrow terms with which he defined it – quietly pulled him into drift. We never saw or heard from Aakesh again. Losing contact with him underscored how fragile long-term desistance scaffolds can be: when they fail, men don't always relapse dramatically, sometimes they simply disappear.

5.1.3 'Bounty Hunting'

Every Monday morning, the RESTART team had a weekly virtual catch up. Here, each support worker gave updates case by case – quick status checks, not deep stories – a rhythm that made visible who was still in sync and who had fallen out of step.

"Kevin?" Leane asked the room.

"Recalled – missed three appointments, gone quiet for weeks."

“Dillon?”

“Recalled.”

“Tarek?”

“MIA, the only person who sees him regularly these days is the pharmacist when he picks up his script[24].”

“TJ?” Leane carried on.

“Recalled.”

The rhythm was blunt, almost mechanical. A name, a fate. For some, there was a sliver more detail:

“Jed?” Carol asked, running through the list of clients she had on hand.

“He’s gone quiet. Got himself mixed up in the wrong crowd, I suspect. When I suggested we use some of his £85 discharge grant on food and essentials, he declined with ‘I’ve just got some debts to sort out first.’ Haven’t been able to get a hold of him for a few weeks now.”

Another worker chimed in:

“Yeah, I have guys like that, where I know from day one that I won’t be seeing them again. I had one lad – street homeless for years. After his release we got him a hot meal, sorted paperwork, then he asked me to drop him at his usual street corner. No phone, no address, nothing. I knew I’d never see him again.”

“And what about Jamie, any luck chasing him down?” Carol continued.

“Nope. He’s not coming into probation; he hasn’t picked up his prescription from the pharmacy. His PO says he’ll be recalled—”

“—if they can find him.”

[24] prescription

“When did we go from being these guys’ emergency contacts to being their bloody bounty hunters?” One of the workers asked.

The team half-joked about being “bounty hunters” – chasing clients through car parks, food banks, doorsteps. Some had a list of ‘usual spots’ to check if they hadn’t heard from men – in car parks, kitchens, libraries, the edges of high streets – not because men had rebelled against support, but because they had slipped out of rhythm. The team’s weekly meetings ticked on like a metronome – a rhythm that kept order for staff, even as clients’ weeks dissolved into days without rhythm or order. The contrast was stark: institutional time continued to mark itself; men’s time no longer did.

The phrase ‘bounty hunting’ stuck because it captured a truth: their work had become pursuit: pursuit of men who were not resisting, but simply *slipping*. What did that slipping look like? Sometimes it was an unanswered call – not a decision, but a phone without credit, pawned for cash, or left on a friend’s table. Sometimes it was a pharmacy noting a script uncollected, bottles stacked behind the counter while days stretched without dose. Other times it was neighbours saying, “he comes and goes at odd hours,” meaning long nights awake, mornings asleep, afternoons unmarked. One man was glimpsed slumped outside Greggs at lunchtime, another spotted cutting across the high street three times in one day, circling without destination. Drift was visible only in fragments – scattered traces of days without rhythm.

I recall a morning I had spent in Milton Keynes with one of the RESTART workers, Reece, hunting down a client who was on the brink of recall. Reece knew where to look. On the second floor of a Sainsbury’s multi-storey car park, he found who he was looking for – almost.

“You just missed him,” a woman said from a pile of blankets. She was sleeping rough.

“So he has been around here then?” Reece asked.

“Every night this week,” she replied. “He’s been using again. Heroine.”

Reece nodded, thanked her, and asked her to pass on a message: that he'd come by again.

These disappearances were not sudden ruptures but the outcome of drift already underway. Early scaffolds – housing, prescriptions, probation meetings – had thinned. The week no longer had fixed points to hold it. The absence was the point: hours folded into each other, nights and days blurred, until the week itself became hard to find. What remained were open days, unstructured hours, the kind of time that swallowed contact. While earlier vignettes showed the build-up to drift: the golden ticket that eroded under intrusion, the employment that never arrived, this vignette shows drift in its barest form. Earlier cases traced how scaffolds eroded; here, the erosion is complete. Men don't always fall with noise – sometimes they just fade. Phones stop, doors stay closed, routines unmark the week. Disappearance was drift made visible.

5.2 DISCUSSION

While earlier chapters charted the volatility of the first days and weeks after release, this chapter shifts focus to the quieter, slower-burning dynamics that emerge months into the resettlement journey. At this stage, many men had secured stable housing, maintained sobriety, complied with license conditions, and avoided reoffending. But the long-term nature of desistance reveals different kinds of risk: not only of crisis or collapse, but of drift, fatigue, or quiet disengagement.

The discussion traces four aspects of the long run: First, Timing of Challenges (5.2.1) shows how risks surfaced at different stages rather than fading with time. Second, Open vs Owned Time: In Search of New Scaffolding (5.2.2) examines how scaffolds such as routine, sobriety, and family ties helped stabilise weeks once probation clocks fell silent. Third, Design Labour: The Work of Holding Time (5.2.3) traces the invisible, repetitive effort required to hold desistance together day by day. Finally, Empty Time and Drift (5.2.4) analyses how, once early milestones were passed, men often encountered a vacuum in which time felt stalled and progress directionless.

Across these themes, desistance appears less like a fixed trajectory and more like an ongoing, adaptive process – one shaped as much by time as by effort. Desistance, then, is not simply about reaching safety, but about sustaining it, often in conditions stripped of structure, guidance, or reward.

5.2.1 Timing of Challenges

This section examines the rhythm at which challenges emerged across men's desistance journeys. Rather than fading with time, threats shifted form, appearing on different clocks**.** Drawing on the longest trajectories within the study – men who remained out for 12 to 18 months – it shows that setbacks did not affect all men in the same way, nor at the same time or tempo. Instead, different kinds of challenges surfaced at different stages, often as a function of what other scaffolds were already in place. This layered unfolding of problems echoes Durnescu's analysis of the 'pains of re-entry' and Western's account in *Homeward*, both of which use longitudinal interviews to show how different problems come to the fore at different stages after release, as the most immediate crises subside and new challenges take their place (Durnescu, 2019; Western, 2018).

Early-stage threats were immediate and structural. Housing, addiction, and lack of income posed urgent risks to desistance in the first weeks. Men released into homelessness or with untreated dependence were the quickest to return to custody. These threats often compounded one another: men without shelter or money were more likely to use, and those using were more likely to be recalled. By months 1–4, as housing or prescriptions temporarily settled, a new tempo of risk appeared. Old peers resurfaced, purposeless hours stretched, and probation check-ins thinned. The very same newly secured scaffolds created visibility and vulnerability for new challenges. Joey's story illustrated this shift: once he had income and a tenancy, acquaintances re-emerged precisely because he was visible and solvent. Progress itself became exposure. At the 6–12-month mark, deeper challenges surfaced: mental health problems that had been muted by more urgent concerns, or the creeping effects of isolation and boredom. One man's reflection at month 16 – that

his struggles might stem from untreated depression rather than housing instability – showed how only once scaffolds held could hidden issues enter view. Stability created space for vulnerability. In the longest cases, beyond 12 months, men faced existential questions: what now, and what next? These were not dramatic relapses but slow erosions – motivation sapped by days without clear direction, scaffolds stretched thin, futures uncertain. Aakesh's stalled search for work exemplified this: other scaffolds held, but because employment did not arrive on the expected timeline, his days slipped into drift.

While these sequences are of course not universal, the trajectories of those who remained in the community for the longest stretches suggest an important pattern: challenges emerged in layers, not linearly. Immediate scaffolds absorbed the first shocks, but their very arrival enabled new risks to surface. Timing was not simply descriptive: it was a mechanism through which new vulnerabilities are activated as others are resolved. Challenges emerged because of when other supports had landed. Desistance did not become easier with time – it became *different*. Agency too changed tempo: urgent and crisis-driven at the start, it became quieter – often underappreciated – effort later.

This has implications for both research and practice. Studies that follow prison-leavers only for three to six months risk missing these second-wave challenges. Without longer horizons, later-emerging vulnerabilities – drift, purposelessness, reactivated networks, untreated health – disappear from view. Success at month three is not proof of long-term stability; it may simply mean the next layer of risk has yet to surface. Joey's story illustrates this shifting terrain. After several quiet months, his stability itself became the trigger for risk — old acquaintances re-emerged precisely because he'd secured income and housing. What had once felt like progress began to feel like exposure.

Aakesh's trajectory shows the same mechanism from another angle. In his early months, unemployment was expected; housing and probation were enough to keep him steady. But as those scaffolds solidified, the absence of work took on a new weight. By month six, what had once been tolerable began to feel like stagnation. Each rejection landed harder, not only because he wanted income, but because the tempo of his

life no longer matched the timeline he imagined for redemption. Timing, and men's perception of it, mattered: employment was not just missing, it was late.

Taken together, these cases show how timing is not neutral but constitutive. The very same scaffold can function as protection in one moment and as vulnerability in another. Progress itself can activate risk: housing opens the door to old networks; stability sharpens the sense of stalled motion. Desistance is not a flat trajectory of steady improvement. Instead, the nature of challenges – and the kind of agency required to meet them – shifts over time. Desistance did not become easier with time — it became different. And threats to desistance do not disappear – they evolve. Agency too changed tempo: urgent and crisis-driven at the start, quieter – and often underappreciated – effort later. Therefore, the passage of time, and men's perception of its tempo, became a mechanism in itself – opening space for new risks even as earlier ones closed.

5.2.2 Open vs Owned Time: In Search of New Scaffolding

This section examines what happens when imposed and conditional scaffolding falls away and men are left with open time. While on licence, men's days were structured by probation calendars, hostel curfews, and the immediate scramble for housing or benefits. Once those timelines expired, however, the chase to secure basic needs slowed. What remained were long mornings, drifting nights, and hours with no obvious or immediate demands. For the first time in months, even years, men had to decide for themselves how to structure a week, how to pass a day, how to keep going without someone else's timetable.

The luxury of no longer being bound to institutional time – probation timetables, curfews, and mandatory appointments – did not come without risk or complication. Newfound temporal autonomy meant men could now design their own days, but it also meant those days were newly exposed. As Joey's case showed, open

time could be quickly absorbed by negative influences[25] – acquaintances who appeared at his door, debts that re-surfaced, or habits that thrived on idle hours. Open time did not only bring freedom; it made men more visible and more vulnerable.

How men chose to fill that time – if they filled it at all – had consequences for their desistance practice. Left unfilled, open time slid into empty time and drift, as seen in the 'Bounty Hunting' (5.1.3) vignette and explored further in 5.2.4. Others allowed it to be filled by old networks, drug use, and practices that heightened the risk of recall. And still others found or built new scaffolds that offered shape and predictability: routines, family households, or sobriety practices that gave their days rhythm. These scaffolds transformed open time into owned time — days that were no longer imposed but chosen.

Here, it is useful to clarify terms. Scaffolds (originally Giordano et al., 2002) are the structures that organise time — sometimes imposed and conditional, like probation appointments or housing placements, and sometimes chosen, like sobriety, volunteering, or family support. Anchors — as I employ the term in this thesis — are the specific, repeatable points that make a scaffold durable: the 6:40 a.m. bus, the Tuesday gym session, the school run at 8:30, a Friday bill payment, or tea after shift. Anchors have a protective function: they keep men from experiencing drift, by rooting their time in fixed points, people, or pastimes. Scaffolds describe the form of support; anchors are the beats that give a week rhythm.

As imposed and conditional scaffolds dissolved, men had to find new scaffolds, rooted in anchors, to keep themselves from drifting. For many, routine became that scaffold. Routine mattered not only structurally but psychologically. A wide literature links uncertainty with worsened mental health and impaired coping (Massazza et al., 2023). By offering stability and predictability, routines reduced anxiety and made persistence feel possible. Routine gave men more than material stability – it affirmed that they could keep going. Routine itself became evidence. Where nothing was scheduled, hours could fold into one another. Where small anchors existed, the week regained shape. Men often described needing "something to get up

[25] Or what Clear (2007) terms 'criminogenic social conditions'

for," not because the task itself mattered, but because it held the day in place. The scaffolds observed here did not remove setbacks, but they softened their impact, allowing men to recover rhythm after disruption.

For others, family or supportive relationships functioned as scaffolds. In Joey's case, we saw supportive relationships filling the role after he abandoned his council flat and redesigned his week around subtler anchors like shared meals, splitting chores, and the peace of anonymity. Sampson and Laub (1993) argue that strong interpersonal bonds can protect desisters from setbacks. But the idea of owned time foregrounds a different logic: one less about attachment per se, and more about the steadying influence of durable, designed (rather than imposed) scaffolding. The protective mechanism was not Joey's brother himself, but Joey's ability to redesign his routine around newly-established anchors. Here, scaffolding took the form of relational infrastructure, anchored in daily gestures of care and obligation rather than institutional timetables.

Sobriety was rarer, but especially powerful as a scaffold. Drug abuse was one of the most consistent drivers of disillusionment and instability (Mitchell, Wilson & MacKenzie et al., 2012). Though some of the men used their time in prison to detox, maintaining sobriety in the community proved far more difficult (Binswanger et al., 2012). 78% of men in my sample reported histories of substance abuse, and over 40% flagged it as a support need on first meeting with RESTART. These figures mirror smaller-scale studies showing very high prevalence of past substance misuse among prison leavers (Gregory & O'Sullivan, 2020), and national statistics showing only 37% of those with post-release referrals access community treatment within three weeks (National Audit Office, 2023). In practice, sobriety functioned as a scaffold because it imposed its own anchors. For some, the daily trip to the pharmacy to collect methadone became the point that fixed mornings in place. Others used regular Narcotics Anonymous (NA) or Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings to punctuate their weeks or marked their progress through counting days sober. These anchors gave time a rhythm that reduced exposure to drift. Where scaffolds like housing or probation expired, sobriety introduced new structures: the pharmacy counter at 10 a.m., the circle of chairs in a church basement on Thursday nights, the visible tally of clean days.

By contrast, in the absence of sustained scaffolding around addiction, relapse and recall came quickly. The Ministry of Justice (2022) reports that individuals with a history of substance misuse are nearly twice as likely to be recalled within a year of release. Drug dependency undermines stability in nearly every domain – housing, employment, relationships – and leaves men acutely vulnerable to emotional or situational stressors (Rowlands Snyder et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2025). Men who were abusing drugs had their weeks unravel: phones went unanswered, appointments missed, days folded into nights. But those who managed sustained sobriety — through detox or deliberate abstinence — were more likely to maintain housing, hold down jobs, and sustain routines. Sobriety acted both as buffer and amplifier: without it, every setback was magnified; with it, progress in other domains became possible.

What distinguished sustainable scaffolds from fragile ones were anchors: the repeatable practices that held time together and made progress feel cumulative. Without scaffolds, anchors risked being too fragile to hold; but, importantly, without anchors, scaffolds remained supports in name only, unable to pace or structure daily life. Scaffolding did not simply 'support' desistance; it actively shaped the conditions under which it could take root and be sustained. Among the men who remained in the community for longer stretches, nearly all relied on some combination of scaffolds — family ties, sobriety practices, or steady routines — that buffered against setbacks and helped restore rhythm when progress faltered.

In this sense, the distinction between open and owned time becomes clear. Open time was the condition left when institutional scaffolds expired — long hours with no imposed rhythm. Owned time, by contrast, emerged when men could assemble new scaffolds and sustain them through anchors. What mattered was not only the presence of support but its pacing: whether days could be reliably repeated, and whether weeks could hold together. Desistance was steadied not by single achievements, but by the active, agentic conversion of open time into owned time.

5.2.3 Design Labour: The Work of Holding Time

If scaffolds and anchors gave structure to men's weeks, they did not remove the work required to sustain them. The transition from open to owned time was not automatic but demanded ongoing effort: finding or building suitable scaffolding and establishing anchors was slow, deliberate work. This labour was rarely visible to probation, services, or researchers because it took the form of small, repetitive acts rather than dramatic milestones. Yet for the men themselves, it was central: they had to design ways of holding their days together when imposed scaffolds receded.

This underscores a key point: scaffolds were not only *given*; they were *made*. Through repetition, discipline, and the deliberate cultivation of supportive conditions, men could design routines and relationships that steadied time. Scaffolds and anchors, therefore, are not only protective structures; they are also acts of agency themselves. In building and sustaining new routines, men were not just accessing stability – they were actively producing it.

This design labour was both temporal and emotional. Temporally, men had to create rhythms that made days repeatable: cooking at the same hour, showing up for a meeting, or walking to the pharmacy each morning. These small anchors could feel trivial, yet they carried disproportionate weight. Where nothing was scheduled, hours collapsed into each other; where anchors existed, the week regained shape and rhythm. Emotionally, design labour involved the quiet work of sustaining belief that progress was worth continuing even when it felt imperceptible. As one man put it: "It's not big things, it's just getting through a day without losing it."

Aakesh's story showed this labour starkly. Having secured housing and routine check-ins, he still found himself restless. The speed at which early scaffolds were achieved – benefits sorted, probation completed, housing secured – left him with rising expectations for employment. When this failed to materialise, his routine felt hollow. What looked outwardly like stability in fact required a grinding effort to resist drift. He

described the frustration of "waiting around all day," a reminder that stability is not absence of labour but its redirection into the work of waiting, enduring, and resisting relapse.

Sobriety likewise demanded daily discipline and active labour. For men on methadone scripts, the daily walk to the pharmacy became not just treatment but an anchor. Some spoke of structuring everything else around that trip: "Get my script, then I know the day has started." Others used NA or AA meetings as scaffolds, repeating attendance until it became routine. These practices were not one-off achievements but accumulative efforts. Each meeting attended or day counted sober was a deliberate act of temporal design – a way of ensuring time did not collapse into empty hours and maintaining a slow, steady tempo of progress.

Family and relational scaffolds also illustrate design labour; supportive relationships had to be nurtured and maintained as relational goods (Weaver, 2015). Joey's decision to abandon his flat and move in with his brother was not simply reliance on external support. It was the active work of re-designing his week around subtler anchors: shared meals, chores, and the anonymity that came from moving across town. These adjustments demanded compromise, negotiation, and persistence. What appeared to outsiders as "just living with family" was in practice an act of labour: remaking time to reduce exposure to old networks and build a repeatable rhythm in safer ground.

What unites these cases is the recognition that desistance depended not only on external scaffolds but on men's daily labour to animate them. Routine, sobriety, and relationships became stabilising supports only when maintained through repetition. Without that labour, scaffolds frayed into empty hours or collapsed under pressure. With it, men could turn open time into owned time, a process full of both intent and agency. The agency once directed toward visible milestones — securing housing, benefits, or work — now took on a subtler but no less vital form: the quiet labour of sustaining routines, sobriety, and relationships.

Yet even when design labour was sustained, its limits became clear. The labour of holding time together risked tipping into the labour of waiting, with men caught between having "done everything right" and

feeling stalled or stuck in time. It is in this gap — when scaffolds endure but forward motion stalls — that empty time and drift emerge (5.2.4).

5.2.4 Empty Time and Drift

Section 5.2.4 turns to the risks of unstructured time. Drift is treated here not as a deliberate refusal but as a temporal condition: the slow slide of mornings into afternoons, the collapse of sleep rhythms, the hollowing-out of weeks. Without scaffolds, empty time produced vulnerability — exposure to old networks, relapse, or quiet withdrawal. Where earlier sections traced how men built scaffolds and anchors to convert open time into owned time, this section examines what happened when those scaffolds faltered or when early milestones were reached but nothing new replaced them. Drift emerged both from absence and from completion: not only the failure to secure stability, but the emptiness that followed once stability was nominally achieved.

Drift, therefore, was bound up with markers of success**.** Conventional benchmarks – employment, housing, and sobriety – were experienced not simply as outcomes but as expectations, weighted with pressure and meaning. Even once achieved, they carried a new risk: that life would stall without the next goal. Outwardly, a man with stable accommodation, benefits, and periods of sobriety appeared settled. Yet beneath the surface was often a quieter psychological struggle: the demand to maintain forward motion, to demonstrate progress, and to meet perceived milestones of success.

The weight of these expectations was not incidental. It was woven into the architecture of resettlement itself. These expectations were rarely self-defined. Instead, they were shaped by institutional logics that equate stability with punctual appointments, fixed addresses, visible engagement with approved services, and entry into formal employment. From the first day of release, men were expected to present themselves to probation, secure accommodation, and prove compliance. These front-loaded demands reveal a deeper logic: resettlement is not just a process but a test, structured around compressed timelines and externally

imposed benchmarks, leaving little space for the slower, more contingent processes through which people might otherwise rebuild their lives. Criminal justice supervision carries a chronopolitics of responsibility that burdens individuals with the timely demonstration of progress. Sobriety, for example, was not simply a health practice but a symbol — of reform, of legitimacy, of worth. Housing was not simply shelter but a proof of settlement. Employment, in particular, became both a personal aspiration and an institutional marker of rehabilitation. For many men in this study, success was not simply about desisting from crime – it was about meeting certain visible milestones.

The dual function of employment was especially fraught. Men spoke of wanting to "feel normal," "get back to work," or "have a routine." On the surface, these were self-directed goals. Yet the consistency with which they appeared — and the emotional weight they carried — suggests that they were shaped as much by institutional expectations as by personal preference. Employment was both a person goal — a source of dignity, routine, and self-worth — but also institutional, reflecting a broader logic of responsibilisation in post-release supervision. Employment appeared both as dignity and as test, a measure of whether desistance was real. When that test was repeatedly failed, and men repeatedly denied employment, it corroded self-belief. Chapter 2 illustrated how work was often described as the top priority upon release, tied to masculinity, progress, and forward motion. Early on, this could be motivating. But by month 8 or 12, for men who had already secured housing, sobriety, or distance from negative networks, the absence of work became more than an inconvenience. It became a looming shadow, a deferred milestone whose absence suggested failure.

Aakesh's story illustrates this point with devastating clarity. For over a year he sustained sobriety and desistance, applying month after month for entry-level jobs in mechanics, hospitality and logistics. By his thirty-fifth rejection, the weight of deferred success became unbearable. "It wasn't the job itself," he explained, "it was what it represented" —a sign he was getting somewhere, a stake in the future. When that was repeatedly denied the resolve that had sustained his desistance began to falter. Within weeks of that rejection, he relapsed. Weeks later, RESTART lost contact with him entirely. His case illustrates not a simple

failure to cope but the toll of a goal deferred too long. By month twelve, employment was not simply about wages. It had become a barometer of worth, a signal of forward motion. Without it, time felt stuck. This sense of 'stuckness' was not financial. Most men had stable income through benefits, and some — particularly those with long-term physical or mental health conditions — had little realistic prospect of formal employment. But the psychological weight of employment remained heavy. Even when structural exclusion explained rejection — criminal records, stigma, poor health — men internalised the absence as personal failure. They did not simply see themselves as jobless; they saw themselves as failing at progress.

This reveals a further dimension of drift. Empty time was not always the product of failing to meet basic needs. It could also arise once those needs were met, when the official tests had been passed but no new rhythms replaced them. Drift, in this sense, was post-marker emptiness: the sense of time stalling, of nothing to move toward, of progress exhausted. The wider policy climate sharpened this dynamic. State-led resettlement frameworks continue to conflate formal employment with rehabilitation, even while acknowledging the significant barriers prison-leavers face. McNeill and Weaver (2010) argue that state-led models of reintegration tend to reduce progress to narrow behavioural outputs, ignoring the more contingent, relational, and identity-driven ways in which people actually rebuild their lives. The men in this study echoed this disconnect. Compliance was possible, but without reaching internalised markers like work, many still felt stalled. The men in this study echoed this disconnect: even as they complied with official requirements, many felt stalled or directionless without reaching certain internalised markers of success—especially employment.

As earlier sections have shown, desistance, when studied through a chronopolitical framework, is as much about the speed of arrival, tenure and tempo of challenges as it is about the challenges themselves. The same applies to 'successes' – it not simply a matter of *if* men achieve milestones or secure scaffolds, but *when;* and whether their lived time matches their expected progress, tempo and rhythm. This section also echoes a pattern that has been evidenced since pre-release, men's perceived progress is undoubtedly

influenced by institutional timelines and the imposed expectations and evaluations of progress they produce.

Temporal drift, then, was more than chaos. It was not merely about losing scaffolds or anchors but about empty time after the suspension of imposed timelines. Once probation calendars expired and early scaffolds were secured, men often faced a vacuum of time: no new deadlines, no imposed rhythm, and no obvious next step. The same markers that once motivated desistance — housing, sobriety, work — could become sources of pressure or disappointment when absent, or hollow when achieved. Drift was the temporal condition that followed: the quiet collapse of momentum, the flattening of weeks, the slow erosion of desistance.

5.3 CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that the long run of resettlement is not a linear path of consolidation, but a precarious phase marked by delayed risk, fading support, and quiet forms of disengagement. Even when men reach the early milestones of desistance – stable housing, sobriety, employment, license compliance – new challenges emerge that are harder to see, name, or address. What follows is not always a dramatic return to crime or custody, but a kind of drift: a loss of structure, purpose, or momentum that can undermine otherwise 'successful' outcomes.

Across the three vignettes, we saw different manifestations of this late-stage instability. Joey's story (5.1.1) showed how a prosocial contact – in this case, a brother – could counterbalance the latent pull of negative networks that resurfaced once material stability was achieved. Aakesh's story (5.1.2) revealed how unmet expectations around work and recognition gradually wore away the fragile routines that had sustained his progress**.** And the RESTART team's accounts of men who vanished (5.1.3) – from probation, from services, from view – illustrated the limits of institutional engagement in the face of withdrawal that was not chaotic, but quiet. Taken together, these cases emphasise the temporal shape of desistance challenges. They show

how risks were reconfigured rather than resolved, and how progress was destabilised not only by external setbacks but by the fading of structure and the weight of unmet expectations. Desistance, in this context, was less a steady climb than a volatile process of adjustment and repair.

As the routines of supervision receded, so too did the buffers that held men steady. In this light, 'success' becomes a fragile, shifting category – less a destination reached than a state to be continually sustained, recalibrated, and, at times, renegotiated. This labour was rarely recognised by institutions. Probation marked missed appointments or relapse as failures but seldom counted the invisible effort of maintaining sobriety, showing up on time, or simply holding steady. The discrepancy between how men experienced this work and how it was evaluated by services is a tension returned to in the next chapter. Chapter 6 turns to the men who remained in the community for the full 18 months. But rather than framing them as triumphs of desistance, it asks: by what measures are we calling this success? And who benefits – or disappears – when we do?

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6 INTRODUCTION

Across the thesis so far, resettlement has appeared as effortful, unstable, and highly contingent. Pre-Release (Ch.2) planning unfolded under evaluative pressure; Release day (Ch.3) compressed time and turned scaffolding into surveillance; the First Month (Ch.4) exposed structurally hostile conditions that demanded constant recalibration; and The Long Run (Ch.5) showed some scaffolding in place yet supervision receding, producing open time that could feel empty as often as owned. Threaded through is the application of a chronopolitics framework of desistance – lived tempos and institutional tempos repeatedly pulling apart – as we consider how internal, structural and temporal mechanisms interact to shape, sustain, and unsettle desistance.

This chapter returns to the cohort at month 18, when RESTART winds down and external benchmarks loosen. By the end of formal fieldwork, 18 months after the first releases, 34 of the original 150 men were known to be living in the community, 99 had spent time back in prison, and 17 were no longer in contact with RESTART or probation services (see 1.1.2, Figure 1). At this point, a new fragility becomes visible: evaluative misalignment. Behaviourally, several men remain out of prison; yet recognition of 'success' diverges across three vantage points — probationary metrics, the researcher's interpretive lens, and the men's own survival thresholds.

Three vignettes anchor this tension. 'Redefining' (6.1.1) follows Colin, who treats recall as a tactical shelter from relapse; 'Dodging' (6.1.2) traces Russell, who has stayed out but experiences himself as perpetually on the edge; 'Snapping' (6.1.3) turns to Pat, whose sobriety holds through routine, place, and community. Each shows intent, behaviour, and recognition drifting out of sync.

The discussion that follows is organised into four analytical sections: Desistance by Default (6.2.1) shows how men can be doing desistance tactically or incidentally — through avoidance, routine, or recall as shelter — without a settled plan or identity shift. Fragile Intention (6.2.2) examines motivation that exists but

remains contingent, easily destabilised by housing, networks, and the timing of pressures. What 'Counts' as Success? (6.2.3) argues that success cannot be inferred from reconviction alone but must be evaluated temporally – by patterned stability over time (how risk is kept low, for how long, and through which routines). Finally, To Whom Must it 'Count'? (6.2.4) brings the vantage points together, folding questions surrounding 'successful' desistance into questions of misaligned recognition: probation's metrics, the researcher's interpretation, and the men's own survival thresholds. Across these sections, the argument is that at 18 months desistance cannot be read from reconviction alone; it must be evaluated in time – how change is sustained, at what tempo, and by whom it is acknowledged.

6.1 DESCRIPTION

The vignettes that follow return to three men at the eighteen-month point. Rather than stable transitions or clear transformations, they show improvised, contingent practices for staying out: managing exposure, building routines, and using time tactically. Intent, behaviour, and recognition do not consistently align; what 'counts' as success diverges across probation's metrics, the researcher's reading, and the men's own thresholds.

Each case spotlights a different configuration. 'Redefining' (6.1.1, Colin) treats recall as a protective tactic when community triggers intensify — a way to suspend exposure and hold sobriety; 'Dodging' (6.1.2, Russell) frames staying out as a sequence of near-misses during the countdown to licence expiry, with family rather than services carrying the load; 'Snapping' (6.1.3, Pat) shows sobriety held through place and early-start routines, a built scaffold that turns empty time into tentatively owned time. Across them, evaluative misalignment is explicit: tactics that best sustain change are not always those most legible to formal success measures, nor to men themselves. The section prepares the discussion that follows — on how desistance at this stage is sustained through timing and routine (6.2.1), may operate without settled

identity shift (6.2.2), and requires a reconsideration of what counts as success (6.2.3) and to whom it must qualify (6.2.4).

6.1.1 'Redefining'

Colin had made a deliberate effort to turn his life around in ways that he judged to be within his control. Four years earlier, he'd been in the passenger seat of a car accident that had killed his grandfather and left him severely injured. The tragic accident had serious consequences for his physical and mental health. He developed an addiction to the pain medication he was prescribed for his injuries and remained dependent on the drugs four years later. His drug use was, according to him and his probation officer, what led him to prison. He was "a bright young man" with "so much potential" his RESTART worker and probation officer agreed.

When I first met him in custody, he had been sober for the entirety of his eight-month sentence and had vowed to stay sober upon release. "I can't control where I'll end up or who or what will screw me over, I can only do my part and stay clean", he would say. Colin was "focusing on what [he] could control" and in doing so he was exercising agency. He took accountability for his past and had a coherent plan for his future. "Drugs were the problem. And now I'm no longer using." He was thoughtful and measured, framing change in pragmatic rather than redemptive terms.

He was fascinated by my research and by the topic of desistance. He'd ask me to reference and recount classic criminological scholarship and theories. "My offence was a one-off, and it was 1000% linked to my addiction." He would say. "I know I will desist. I'm already desisting. There is no bit of me that wants to keep offending." His straightforwardness was striking. Was he right? Could it be that simple?

After his release, he did – as far as any formal measure could confirm – stay sober. He passed probation's random drug tests, never missed an appointment or meeting, and regularly reported his progress to

RESTART. And given the limited rehabilitation support he'd received for his addiction in prison and in the community, his determination to remain sober during his first prison sentence and resettlement experience was notable. He faced challenges out in the community like any prison-leaver would – failed attempts at securing employment, housing insecurity, strict licence conditions – but sobriety became his anchor, the one thing he "could control." In the language developed across the thesis, sobriety functioned as a built scaffold: a deliberately assembled set of routines and repeatable anchors that helped convert vulnerable, *empty* time into tentatively owned time. One month passed. Then three. Then five. And he'd stayed out and stayed sober, remaining as pragmatic as he'd been inside about what he could and could not control.

There were bouts of homelessness that were challenging for Colin. While he had some family members he could stay with temporarily, other members of his support network were still deeply entrenched in drug use. It was on one of these occasions that Colin was arrested. 'Breaching licence conditions' was the exact charge. His RESTART worker was dumbfounded. We went to see him the next morning in police custody.

"He's been waiting for you guys" one of the officers said. And sure enough, Colin looked relieved to see us, as though he had been expecting us.

"Thanks for coming to see me. I was afraid you'd think I'd given up," he said, composed as always. "I haven't."

"What happened, Colin?" His RESTART worker asked.

"I'm staying clean." He said in his collected way. "I'm here because I'll have a bed, can keep my head down, stay clean, and keep desisting from in here."

The room paused, the logic not immediately legible to service metrics. His RESTART worker and I exchanged an uncertain glance as we tried to understand what Colin was saying.

He remained resolute: "This way, I'm staying away from my old triggers. And next time I'm out, I'll have an even better head-start."

It took me a moment to understand what Colin was saying. For Colin, being recalled to prison wasn't failure in the way relapsing would have been. Recall operated as a temporal reset – a way to suspend exposure to cues until risks subsided – and thus as a tactic for managing time rather than a moral capitulation. Prison served as a shelter from relapse when the triggers in the community were too strong. Relapse, not reconviction, was the defeat to be avoided. Accordingly, turning himself in, by breaking a licence condition, was a means, "within his control", to an end. His logic was hard to dispute. Desistance, as framed by Colin, wasn't about uninterrupted progress or moral purity. It was about refusing to collapse – even if that refusal took place behind bars. Rather than disqualifying himself from the label 'desisted', he reframes survival as resistance, incarceration as a shelter from relapse, and returning to custody as a conscious tactic to avoid greater harm.

Here, evaluative standards misalign. On probation's ledger, recall marks failure; on the researcher's reading, it complicates simple behavioural metrics; for Colin, it is the most rational way to keep owned time intact. His case troubled the notion that progress must be linear or externalised, and forced a reckoning with the uncomfortable question: Can someone be desisting from inside prison? Desisting whilst breaching? Desisting whilst being reconvicted? This wasn't a fundamental misunderstanding of desistance; it was a revolution of the concept itself. Colin wasn't misinterpreting desistance. He was redefining it.

Colin's tactic shows desistance as time-management and risk-avoidance, sustained throughs scaffolding of routines and rules rather than a settled identity shift or a complete termination of offending. It also foregrounds evaluative misalignment: whose criteria count when the tactic that best sustains sobriety violates the very conditions meant to evidence change?

6.1.2 'Dodging'

In early January, 2024, I got a call from Maxwell, a RESTART worker:

> Do you think you could come to Aylesbury this week to meet with Russell? We're closing his case as RESTART winds down and thought you'd want to speak with him one last time. He's one of the few who's stayed out the whole time. He's really come such a long way.

Russell *had* come a long way. On paper, Russell was flagged as 'high risk'; "The most dangerous man in my sample" I had been warned. You would find the words "no lone working" beside his name on every form. He had severe schizophrenia, was taking antipsychotic medications, and had a history of sudden violent episodes. In person, he was nervous, struggled to maintain eye contact, and displayed clear signs of ADHD and autism. He smiled more than not, was very self-deprecating, and was best friends with his older sister.

I first met him in late October, one month before he was due to be released. He was one of RESTART's first clients and at that stage we were still taking most meetings in the 'legal visits' area, where he was required to wear a high-visibility vest so officers could distinguish him from visitors. Russell explained that the night he was arrested, he didn't remember a thing: "I just blacked out and woke up, covered in blood in a police station with a whole bunch of charges thrown at me," he told us. While concerning, we also knew the medication he was taking might affect his memory. Russell explained his history of violent offending rather similarly: "When this happens," he continued. "It's like a flip of a switch, and suddenly I black out and can't remember what I've done."

A month later, he was released. The first weeks went unusually well. A local charity placed him in an HMO[26] with other prison-leavers; Maxwell opened his Universal Credit claim and put benefits in place; and weekly sessions at the local addiction rehabilitation centre were booked for the duration of his licence. Follow-ups showed regular probation attendance, rehab, a work-skills course in Oxford twice weekly, and registration with an employment agency.

[26] House in Multiple Occupation (HMO): a property rented to ≥3 people from more than one household sharing facilities (GOV.UK); HMOs are widely used within supported/exempt accommodation for prison-leavers (UK Parliament, Exempt Accommodation; Centrepoint).

On my last visit before Maxwell's call, however, the tone shifted. Russell had been out for just under a year at this point. As I commended him on how far he'd come, he interrupted me:

"—Yeah, but I always stay out like this. It's later on that I get recalled. This part isn't the hard part." He told me.

"What do you mean, Russell?"

"I always get recalled after like a year or something."

"Always? Why do you think that is?"

"You know, bad things start to happen, and then it all gets worse. Bad things happen; I start to spiral and just explode."

"Is there anything RESTART can do to stop that from happening *this* time?"

"No not really. There's nothing any of us can do really."

…

"So Helen, do you think you could come to Aylesbury this week to meet with Russell? We're closing his case as RESTART winds down and thought you'd want to speak with him one last time." After our last conversation, I wanted to see him once more. Since his release, he had remained out of prison, without conviction, for 14 months and 23 days. I wanted to hear how he'd avoided the self-fulfilling pattern that seemed to haunt his former releases. What did he do differently this time? How had this stretch been held together despite the pattern he anticipated?

We met at his local Costa – his favourite spot where we'd met many times before. *"It was like a switch flipped. I lost control. I don't remember any of it. All I know is I woke up in a police cell covered in blood that wasn't mine,"* was the first thing I'd recorded him saying to me over a year ago. Now, as we sat facing each other, warm drinks in hand, I'd be taking my last notes.

"What's new, Russell? How have you been?"

He started with housing: “I had to leave the HMO. There’s £15,000 of drugs in that house. Prison is better, at least there’s a screw in there. That house is awful. It’s like putting a kid in a candy shop – they shouldn’t put recovering addicts in places like that.”

“So where are you staying now?”

“I ran away to my sister’s. I was in a bad place. I was drinking, I was using again. My girlfriend started using crack[27] because of that house. Also, now that I’ve got work, when I come home with money people just jump on me. I got home one night, and I caught this group of guys I knew from inside robbing my place, taking the money that I’d been working for. I lost it. I beat one of them up real bad and then ran away before I did something worse.”

“I’m so sorry. Did you go to the police?”

“By the time I went, they’d already reported it. The police handcuffed me and took me in for questioning. They let me go, but it rattled me. I’m just hiding at my sister’s now. At least until my licence is up.”

When I commended him for staying out, he shook his head. “No, no,” He said, refusing the compliment once again. “I dodged it. I dodged it. And I shouldn’t have to. I didn’t want to have to be on the edge like that. I shouldn’t *have* to be on the edge like that. I just barely escaped doing something bad. If it weren’t for my family, I’d be back inside already.”

Russell didn’t feel like he was deserving of any compliments. He rejected the idea that what he was doing counted as ‘success’. Despite being one of a handful of men in my sample who had stayed out of prison for the entire duration of the study, he didn’t feel at all that his ‘dodging’ qualified as desisting. But Russell’s account did illustrate a kind of desistance: ‘dodging’ as the continuous act of avoidance under temporal strain. Licence expiry becomes a countdown; the receding of supervision widens open time that often feels unstructured rather than owned; and the scaffold he relies on is familial rather than institutional. Evaluations

[27] Cocaine

misalign: probation sees successful compliance; a researcher might read sustained non-offending; Russell experiences only near-misses and imminent collapse. In this register, desistance is lived as dodging — an ongoing, active management of exposure and avoidance of risk, that might appear as desistance but didn't feel like the 'real thing'.

6.1.3 'Snapping'

9:30 a.m. at a café in Cowley, Oxford. As I rushed over, running slightly behind schedule, dozens of worries ran through my mind: *Would he be there when I arrived? What would this café be like? What if he waited for me for a few minutes and then left? Would he be sober? Had he kept it up?* And then…*Oh God, what if he hadn't? What if he wouldn't be there because he had relapsed? Or worse, was back inside.*

When I arrived, he was waiting for me, sat at a table by the window, sober, smiling.

"Pat!" I called as I came through the door. "Sorry if I kept you waiting."

Pat checked his phone. "It's three minutes. Think of all the times you've waited more than 30 minutes for me to show." I laughed as I shook his hand, he had a point. I never knew Pat when he was using, but even in the early days of his sobriety, he struggled to be punctual at times.

I joined him at the table. "What do you think of this place then?" Pat had recommended we have our last meeting in a place that was very important to him and his journey to sobriety.

The café was quaint with very comfortable furnishings – think oversized armchairs, warm lighting, and charming artwork. Its menu, handwritten on a big black chalkboard, contained fish and chips, a variety of jacket potatoes, a full English, and an assortment of £2 paninis.

"It's an AA spot. Its run by recovering addicts *for* recovering addicts." He told me. The truth was I had done some research on the venue when he first recommended it. It was a social enterprise café that hired

staff and volunteers from socially excluded backgrounds and offered daily AA sessions and addiction support programming. You'll recall from previous chapters (4.2.2) that Pat was open about his recovery journey and how his housing situation had wreaked havoc on his sobriety – and therefore, desistance – in the past.

"You know I always hated the fact that I was forced to come back to this area after prison. 'Here we go again', I thought coming back to the same neighbourhood, with the same people and the same problems."

This time, however, Pat was one of the handful in my sample who had stayed out for the duration of my study. When I met him inside, Pat had already made an effort to get sober in the prison, as he always had. This time, despite being released to the same neighbourhood and probation office, he had maintained it.

"The first few months are the hardest. You have to force your body to do something different than what your brain wants it to. I had this old friend in Bullingdon, we grew up in the same neighbourhood as kids. He told me every time things got hard, he would go for a long walk, far away from any bars and off-licences so he couldn't act on his urges. He lost 2 stone" he paused and laughed "—and, eventually, he broke his addiction."

"I thought it was stupid, but I ended up doing the very same thing. I don't even remember how I found this place. But one day when I was really struggling, I walked along this high street looking for a pub. And then every pub I passed I said 'no, just one more block' or 'go to the next pub'. Eventually, as I got here, and I stood facing that bar just across the street, something in my brain told me to come inside here [the café] instead. 'If you still want a drink in 30 minutes, you can go' I told myself."

"I then came in here, from opening till closing, every single day for the next 6 weeks, until Kelly – one of the ladies who works here – said 'You! Fetch that gentleman his tea' and then it was 'Pat, clean up those tables' and 'take out this garbage.' And before I knew it, I was helping them run the café. They depended on me.

"'See you at 7, bright and early' she'd call out as I left each evening. And somehow it went from 'I can't drink tonight because I have to be up early' to forgetting that I even wanted to." He paused, then smiled: "Funny that, after all the times living in this neighborhood had pulled me back, this café was its way of paying forward."

"I wanted to talk to you about exactly this. We're coming up to month 18, and you are one of a handful of men who stayed out of prison and desisted for the entirety of my study."

He smiled. "You want to know my secret then? For the book?" He teased and sipped his coffee.

"Something like that" I said. I then sketched the balance between internal motivation and external barriers we had discussed before: how he had come out motivated and then been pulled back by place. "So motivation, alone, isn't enough to desist when external barriers stand in the way."

"You'll find that's actually not true." Pat said. "Not always. There are many guys who manage to just turn themselves around like that [*snaps*] for no specific rhyme or reason. That's how it happened to me."

I was not expecting to hear him say that.

"Sometimes, it's not the big things everyone talks about – job, flat, the right person – sometimes something just snaps into place, and you quit." He continued. "No rhyme, no reason."

He saw I was unconvinced. "Okay, take for example, when I was sick this winter. I wasn't avoiding offending –in my case, using – because I had had a change of attitude, but because I wasn't feeling well and stayed home. In terms of my offending, that was me desisting without meaning to."

"Or better yet" he continued, "think of what I just told you about working at the café. Sometimes this happens when people are busy or distracted, or even when the opportunity doesn't present itself, people can desist without necessarily intending to."

"Other times, you really want to quit, but you can't. I wanted to quit so badly for such a long time, and every time I got released to this same neighbourhood I basically failed. I couldn't crack it no matter how

hard I tried or how badly I wanted it. And then suddenly, when you least expect it, and let go, or stop trying so hard, it happens."

I thought about the men who were recalled for breaking their licence: a missed probation meeting, a broken curfew, a late arrival to an addiction support group. Many wanted desistance "so badly" and were penalised for slips. Equally, I had never considered that the men in my sample might be desisting and experience it as requiring little effort or directed attention. I had only ever thought about desistence as something effortful that required active maintenance. Pat's account pointed to change arriving through timing, routine, and environment rather than declared intent.

Pat's account shifts focus from intention to timing and routine: desistance held by a built scaffold of place, tasks, and early starts that convert empty time into owned time. Recognition misaligns again: probation records compliance; a researcher can read maintained sobriety; Pat insists that change often 'snaps' through circumstance — walking past a pub, catching a shift, being too ill to go out — rather than through declared transformation.

As we wrapped up, I thanked him for his time and participation in my research throughout the 18 months. I also congratulated him on his journey and wished him well for whatever the future held. In classic Pat-style, he joked: "I hope you never have to step foot in this café again." We smiled.

6.2 DISCUSSION

As the preceding vignettes demonstrated, desistance does not present as a singular event or stable achievement but as a shifting – and at times contradictory – process shaped by timing and routine as much as by conscious intent or structural opportunity. While existing literature frequently contrasts intention with structural opportunity, the accounts presented here suggest that this binary may obscure more than it reveals.

Desistance in practice often unfolds in partial, hesitant, and even passive ways – through small choices, time-sensitive scaffolds, and contingent practices that escape easy classification.

What distinguishes the men who remained out of prison at 18 months is not a grand plan, singular will, or uniformly favourable context. Instead, it was the accumulation of everyday negotiations – some deliberate, others reactive – that collectively hold behaviour steady over time. This invites a reconsideration of what desistance looks like, how it is enacted over time, and by what criteria it is judged.

The section develops four points. First, Desistance by Default (6.2.1): staying out can be sustained without a grand identity shift, through built scaffolds that convert empty time into tentatively owned time. Second, Fragile Intention (6.2.2): resolve is intermittent and often off-sequence with practice; routines and timing can carry change through periods of volatility. Third, What 'Counts' as Success? (6.2.3): outcome measures alone can completely flatten individual progress that is dynamic, effortful, and iterative. Fourth, To Whom Must it 'Count'? (6.2.4): evaluation is misaligned across probation, researcher, and men's own perceptions. In what follows, the discussion explores how desistance occurs without design, survives despite ambivalence, and resists fixed definitions of success. The question is not simply whether the men changed, but what 'counts' as change – and to whom that change must ultimately be legible.

6.2.1 Desistance by Default

One of the most enduring tensions in desistance theory is the question of whether change must be intentional and identity-driven, or whether it can happen 'by default'. Can desistance happen *to* someone, or must someone actively maintain it? Much of the literature leans towards the latter, emphasising the centrality of goal-directed agency, identity transformation, and the imagined future self in both initiating and sustaining behavioural change (Giordano et al., 2002; Graham and Bowling, 1995; McNeill, 2012; Murray, 2009). These theorists have defined agentic action as purposeful, goal-driven and directed at a desired end point with an imagined future self in mind (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009).

But must all action be purposeful, active and goal-driven to initiate and sustain desistance? As Goodwin (2022) highlights, whilst many theorists stress the importance of agency, she worries we may be assigning causality prematurely, as there isn't much evidence that active, purposeful action – what scholars call agentic action – is required to achieve desistance (see also Paternoster, 2017).

Russell's experiences capture this ambiguity. In the early stages of his release, Russell spoke about offending like an inevitability – "there's nothing anyone can do", it was something that "just happens". Russell's language implied he felt he had very little control and agency over the matter: "If you had asked me when I first got released, I'd never have thought I'd get so close to the edge…I didn't want to have to get so close to the edge. I never planned to get there…I had just barely escaped doing something bad." His language frames offending as happening to him, even when he "didn't want" or "didn't think" it would. This description was not dissimilar from Pat's account of change happening when least expected. "I couldn't crack it no matter how hard I tried or how badly I wanted it. And then suddenly, when you least expect it…it happens." The implication is also that behavioural change can be experienced as something that happens *to* someone, with or without active effort or maintenance. The men's accounts resonate with Laub and Sampson's (2003) concept of 'desistance by default' whereby cessation of offending can occur absent of any deliberate, identity-based decisions. According to them, individuals can effectively cease offending behaviour not through a conscious, transformative decision, but through a 'structural turning point' – such as stable employment, meaningful relationships or routine practices provoking men to "go straight without even realizing it" (2003:278).

How much of the distinction between agentic and non-agentic action, however, is superficially imposed? Why must the 'structural turning points' described by Laub and Sampson (2003) be regarded as 'default' desistance? Why couldn't stable employment, meaningful relationships or routine practices qualify as self-directed, individual-driven, intentional action? In practice, the boundary between 'default' and 'agentic' is porous. Structural turning points often depended on small, repeated choices (previously called anchors) – showing up for a shift, avoiding a pub, catching an early bus – that look modest in the moment but scaffold

the men's days and, over time, their trajectories. And whilst Russell describes his trajectory as somewhat passive at times, he simultaneously uses language that implies change was active, effortful and ongoing: "I dodged it. I dodged it. But I shouldn't have to be dodging it…I had to escape to my sister's to avoid doing something bad." 'Dodging' and 'escaping' are active verbs. Whilst, in many ways, Russell felt circumstantial factors were out of his control, his response – however tactical and provisional – demonstrated choice, timing, and management of exposure.

Russell and Pat's cases, therefore, are not marked by the presence or absence of agency, rather the *form* agency takes: incremental, often unnoticed, and oriented to time and routine rather than to a narrated identity shift. In the terms used across the thesis, these are built scaffolds that convert empty time into tentatively owned time. Goodwin (2022:43) terms this 'iterational agency' – the subtle, repetitive choices that structure daily life, such as "keeping busy", "distracting oneself," or "staying away from certain people". These practices may not reflect a grand narrative of self-reinvention, but they matter. They sustain desistance, even when they are born of fatigue, fear, or routine rather than ambition.

Desistance, then, need not be identity-driven to be active. And action need not be tethered to an 'imagined future self' to be consequential; Pat's decision to walk past the pub, enter the café, and keep returning for six weeks is hardly accidental. Williams & Schaefer (2021) similarly found that people on parole often adopted what they called 'micro-strategies' – isolation, avoidance, distraction – as conscious agentic strategies (17). By choosing to avoid certain people and places, the men in their study were not simply 'drifting out of crime' (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Matza, 1964) but employing methods of behavioural maintenance. Like dodging, these actions do not signal triumphant change, but they work. Likewise, micro, everyday strategies may not read as change at the level of narrative, yet without them cumulative behavioural stability is unlikely to hold. Without these routine, seemingly mundane actions and everyday decisions, larger, cumulative behavioural change may not take place. The ordinary, insignificant habits one builds – be it distraction, avoidance, or keeping busy – can be foundational to achieving and maintaining desistance. These apparently insignificant habits and micro practices accrue; in certain configurations, they

present as the very ‘snap’ Pat describes – when routine, timing, and reduced exposure align. This sets up the next section where we consider: if desistance does not always require active design, must it always require intent?

6.2.2 Fragile Intent

If desistance does not always require active design, does it require intention? The next question to consider is whether intent is a prerequisite to behavioural change. As earlier chapters have established, an individual’s moment-to-moment resolve does not need to align neatly with their larger desistance goals. Colin’s recall tactic, Russell’s dodging, and Pat’s routine are useful demonstrations of this contradiction: each showing that behavioural can be sustained through timing, exposure management, and built scaffolds, even when resolve wavers.

As with agency, the answer depends on the scale at which we choose to study behavioural change: micro-decisions versus narrated life change. Not every action will be anchored in a clear, conscious commitment to desist. Momentary lapses, ambivalence, or strategic choices – such as Colin’s ‘time-out’ via recall – may appear contradictory but still form part of a broader pattern of change. As Maruna’s (2001) work with prison-leavers found, even those with the strongest motivation to change behaviour and ‘go straight’ may continue to offend intermittently. The question is not whether intention always aligns with behaviour, but whether one can maintain an intent to desist whilst adopting actions that may briefly depart from it.

This aligns with wider scholarship that conceptualises desistance as a non-linear, often ambivalent process. Bottoms et al. (2004) argue that desistance is best understood not as a singular event or stable trajectory, but as a dynamic, uneven process in which contradictions, lapses, and regressions are both expected and integral. They present offending behaviour as on a continuum, wherein complete criminality or complete conformity are unlikely to ever be achieved and sustained. The implication is that intent may not be a fixed or stable resource but a fluctuating accompaniment to practice; it waxes and wanes over time, influenced

by housing, networks, supervision tempo, and access to routine. As such, lapses in intentionality do not necessarily signal a return to offending but may reflect the fluctuating realities of navigating post-carceral life.

This idea is echoed by Farrall and Maruna (2004), who argue that while narratives of intent and identity transformation are central to desistance, these narratives are themselves often constructed *after* change has occurred, rather than preceding or driving it. This suggests that desistance may, in some instances, precede the articulation of a stable desister identity or conscious intent to change; the story catches up with the practice. Intent, therefore, may function retrospectively as a narrative device rather than a predictive mechanism. More recently, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) extend this critique by showing that intent can be fragile, relationally shaped, and emotionally volatile. Participants in their study frequently described periods of disengagement, emotional fatigue, and even resentment towards their perceived desistance journey – without a corresponding return to offending. In this framework, intent is not a necessary condition for behavioural change but one element among several fluctuating supports that can survive contradiction and ambiguity.

Taken together, these perspectives invite a more nuanced conceptualisation of intent – one that recognises its intermittent, performative, and at times latent character. They suggest that sustained behavioural change may be underpinned not by a continuous or fully conscious commitment to desist, but by a patchwork of routine practices, time-sensitive scaffolding, and managed exposure (to people, places, and cues) that collectively enable desistance, even in the absence of a stable or foregrounded intent. In short, intent, like agency, need not be overt, explicit, or consistent for desistance to hold. The analytical task is to specify *when* intention matters, *how* it is scaffolded by routine and environment, and *why* recognition of progress is misaligned when intention is muted or off-sequence. This leads directly to evaluation: if progress can be sustained with muted or intermittent intention, what counts as success, and to whom must it qualify – probation, researcher, or the men themselves?

6.2.3 What 'Counts' as Success?

A central question that emerges from this study is: what 'counts' as success and on what basis is it judged? This question is not just theoretical – it has profound implications for how policy defines rehabilitation, how researchers interpret behavioural change, and how prison-leavers evaluate their own progress. Policy, research, and practice each offer their own frameworks for defining and measuring successful desistance. Within criminal justice policy, particularly in England and Wales, success has often been equated with the complete cessation of offending, typically measured through reconviction or re-imprisonment rates (Weaver, 2015; Ministry of Justice, 2022). This narrow, binary definition offers a measurable endpoint: either one has 'gone straight' or not. It aligns with managerial logics that prioritise efficiency, risk reduction, and quantifiable outcomes. Under this framework, 'success' is often synonymous with public protection and cost saving, rather than personal or social transformation.

Imposing this definition of 'cessation-as-success', however, flattens individual progress that is dynamic and heterogeneous, and risks misunderstanding desistance altogether. Research repeatedly shows that a complete cessation from offending is rarely clean or immediate, and may never happen for some (Bottoms et al., 2004). Moreover, with improved measurement of life course criminality, researchers have found that most individuals will have 'breaks' or 'lapses' from criminal behaviour regardless of whether they are undergoing behavioural change – what Glaser (1964:57) terms the 'zig zag' path of a criminal career. Similarly, someone may appear to be 'going straight' and desisting, despite having no wilful intention to do so and may be using that time 'crime-free' to plan for their next offence. Most criminal careers are short and low-volume, with research finding only a small minority of chronic offenders account for a disproportionate share of recorded crime (Farrington, 2006; Wolfgang, Figlio & Sellin, 1972).

In contrast, much desistance scholarship has argued for more expansive definitions. Maruna (2001), Farrall and Calverley (2006), and McNeill (2016), among others, have suggested that desistance is a gradual and non-linear process that should be understood not only as the absence of crime, but as the presence of positive

change: rebuilding relationships, gaining employment, cultivating self-worth, developing moral agency. From this perspective, 'success' is neither fixed nor binary, but contingent, layered, and often partial. Bersani & Doherty (2018), for instance, argue that we should reframe the metric of 'successful' desistance to include any and all progress made relative to one's past.

What, then, qualifies as success in practice? In Leibrich's (1993) classic study, nearly half of her sample were still involved in crime three years post-release, yet most regarded themselves as desisting. Leibrich's cohort felt that they *were* desisting even when they continued offending, because the frequency or severity of their offending had reduced – reading success through the tempo, pace and direction of change rather than a binary endpoint. This reinforces our earlier point: inconsistent actions do not amount to abandoning one's larger intended trajectory.

The vignettes sharpen this ambiguity. Colin treats recall as a protective tactic to hold sobriety; by a reconviction metric, this fails, yet by a temporal stability metric, it preserves the very change that metric seeks to index. Russell rejects the idea that he is succeeding despite staying out; by compliance data he 'counts', but in his own accounting he is surviving near-misses and anticipating collapse. Pat maintains sobriety through place-bound routine; the narrative he offers is not the grand identity shift that might impress scholars, but clearly 'counts' as a practical regime that converts empty time into owned time. Yet, while Colin feels comfortable claiming the label 'desister', Russell and Pat present a contrasting picture. Russell rejected the suggestion that he was desisting altogether. When commended for the part that he played in his desistence journey, he clarified: "If it weren't for my family, I would've been back inside. I'm ashamed I got so close, to be perfectly honest." Russell's rejection of the idea that he might be desisting reflects his belief that real desistance should "feel more stable", more intentional, and more agentic. "I'm still using; I'm paranoid and don't trust people; I'm not ready for work; I'm not happy with where I'm living; I feel like I'm just barely getting by." According to records and his own self-reports, Russell was not reoffending, yet his journey didn't resemble the narratives of transformation often valorised in academic or policy frameworks. When reflecting on his progress since leaving prison, he didn't feel "far enough" from

where he began 16 months ago: “Just last month I had this whole thing with the police. I’m not even fully recovered from that trauma. It shook me up, I thought I was going back inside.” Russell’s reluctance reflects more than modesty; it speaks to the disjuncture between institutional evaluations of desistance and the internal, relational, and reputational dynamics that shape whether individuals feel they have truly ‘made good’. To make the misalignment tensions visible — and to keep the analysis anchored in how different perspectives might evaluate the processes, differently – a comparative snapshot in the Appendix (Table A.1) arrays Russell, Colin, and Pat at month 18 across the system, participant, and researcher perspectives. Read alongside the narrative, the Appendix Table shows misalignment of ‘what counts’ as success: Russell and Pat downplay or disown progress even where administrative readings remain relatively stable, while Colin sustains a sense of success against a system that codes failure. This is the incongruence that reinforces the labour named in Section 5.2.3: the ongoing work of keeping routines and intent alive when recognition from without and within comes apart.

The binary framing of ‘successful’ versus ‘unsuccessful’ desistance can have a profound effect on how men evaluate their own resettlement journeys, distorting self-evaluation. This might explain why, despite more expansive definitions of desistence, the men at the heart of these processes – people like Russell and Pat – often remain uncertain whether their efforts ‘count’. Men, like Russell, feel like “frauds”, because they measure themselves against how they believe their desistance ‘should’ look. And when their trajectory doesn’t match their imagined script of stable, intentional change, it can produce a deep sense of personal failure: “I shouldn’t have gotten so close.” This dynamic aligns with McNeill’s (2016) ‘tertiary desistance’, which highlights that desistance depends on the social recognition of change by significant others and institutions. Where recognition is withheld or misaligned, identity consolidation falters, producing what Nugent & Schinkel (2016) document as the ‘pains of desistance’: men can ‘pass’ on outcomes yet experience themselves as inauthentic or precarious desisters. In this sample, Russell’s near-misses read as fraudulence to himself; Colin’s recall is institutionally coded as failure despite protecting sobriety; and Pat’s routine labour attracts little acclaim because it lacks a transformation narrative. Conversely, where

recognition is secured and timed to practice (as when staff and peers at the café treat Pat as reliable and needed), the desister identity stabilises.

This sense of 'fraudulence' reflects a broader issue: the gap between externally defined measures of progress and the lived, subjective experience of change. By adopting tools that privilege visibility and speed, evaluation risks moralising a human process – reading relapse or struggle as a character flaw, and disqualifying any practices that are not explicitly goal-oriented. It fosters what Maruna (2001) terms the 'condemnation script,' in which individuals internalise failure as intrinsic to their identity, undermining the fragile sense of agency that desistance depends on. As McNeill (2016) and Nugent and Schinkel (2016) argue, outcome-only judgements of desistance – such as offending or employment status – can eclipse the internal struggles, routine practices, and relational dynamics through which people make sense of their own change. This is particularly problematic when, as Farrall and Calverley (2006) show, desistance often involves false starts, oscillations, and partial successes. What appears as 'failure' in a dataset may represent restraint, recalibration, or moral reorientation in an individual's own story. Thus, the conceptual tools used by researchers and practitioners to measure desistance are not always aligned with the emotional and moral frameworks people use to make sense of their own lives. In temporal terms, the question is less 'has offending ceased?' than 'how is risk being kept low, for how long, and by what routines and supports?'

In short, what counts as success depends on whether progress is read as a binary outcome or as sustained work over time — a difference that becomes starker by eighteen months, when supervision recedes and routines must hold on their own. The next question is one of recognition: if definitions differ, to whom must it 'count' — probation's metrics, the researcher's interpretation, or the men's own thresholds?

6.2.4 To Whom Must it 'Count'?

Measures of desistance that are useful for evaluation may not align with those that hold meaning in individuals' lives. In policy and practice, desistance is often imagined as a forward-facing, macro-level

journey toward self-betterment – marked by stability, goal orientation, and long-term transformation. Yet the narratives shared by prison-leavers frequently complicate this arc. Many internalise this ideal and view personal agency as central to their perceived success (Burnett, 1992; Haigh, 2009), but they also contend with the volatility and precarity of post-carceral life, in which progress is rarely linear or easily measured. This misalignment reveals a critical tension between formal assessments of rehabilitation and the lived experience of those navigating change. If success is too narrowly defined, it risks obscuring the significance of everyday negotiations: the micro-level decisions, fleeting compromises, and moments of restraint that – while less visible – may in fact be more revealing of meaningful change than grand narratives of transformation.

Rather than viewing desistance as a stable end state or fixed behavioural threshold, this thesis proposes that it is better read as a process of ongoing, everyday negotiation. A micro-level lens embraces inconsistency, recognising that meaningful progress may lie in subtle, even conflicting, decisions made over time, and reminds us that one can feel stalled but still be desisting. Desistance, then, is not a fixed state but an accumulation of near-invisible efforts, some of which advance while others set back. Moreover, this approach questions the permanence and perfection criteria that often underlie conventional definitions of success. Must behavioural change be lasting to be meaningful? Must it be irreversible to be valid? If permanence is treated as a precondition for desistance, then success becomes not just aspirational, but largely unattainable. Adopting a micro-scale reveals the impossibility of this expectation: human change is rarely linear, let alone absolute; it is effortful and iterative. One does not 'achieve' desistance once and for all, but must continually sustain it in the face of inevitable misalignments. This reconceptualisation reframes desistance as a form of practice rather than status – as a doing rather than a being. From this perspective, what qualifies as success is less about clean narratives and more about accumulated efforts – about patterns of orientation, rather than the absence of contradiction.

So, do the men's trajectories count? Can Russell's 'dodging', despite his cocaine use and emotional volatility, constitute success? Can Colin's determined commitment to desist, even through reconviction

count? Can Pat's 'snapping' into stability be valid, despite its passivity? The more important question becomes: to *whom* must it count? To Russell? To Pat? To me? According to this study, all three journeys represent meaningful forms of desistence-as-practice. They are active, if partial, reorientations of self through everyday decisions. Whether strategic or incidental, dodging, recalling, or routine-building are how desistance unfolds in practice, not in theory. But more than anything, as Russell and Pat's accounts suggest: *what* counts cannot be separated from *who* counts – and from whose recognition success ultimately depends. Success depends on whose timeline and evaluative criteria are being applied. This calls for rethinking what is measured, who is authorised to measure it, and how value is assigned. A desistance that does not resonate with those living it is no desistance at all.

6.3CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the stories of men who, eighteen months post-release, might be described as having successfully desisted. They had not reoffended, often had stable housing, and had begun piecing together social bonds that prison had fractured. And yet, many of them did not feel that way. They carried guilt, doubt, and insecurity about whether their change was real, durable, or enough. Conversely, others were still offending or engaging in illicit behaviour but described themselves as desisting: remaining committed to change, even when their present actions contradicted it. What emerged across these accounts was not a clear line between desistance and persistence, but an ambivalence – both felt and performed – about what counted, and to whom.

The three vignettes show how change was sustained through routine, timing, and managed exposure to people, places, and cues — recall used as a 'time-out' (6.1.1); dodging risk while counting down to license expiry (6.1.2); and routines that convert empty time into tentatively owned time (6.1.3). Across these cases, evaluative standards misalign: what counts on probation's reconviction and compliance metrics, what a researcher can see as patterned stability, and what men perceive of their own progress frequently diverge.

The discussion then developed four claims. First, Desistance by Default (6.2.1) captures how staying out can be sustained without a grand identity shift: small, repeated practices and built scaffolds sustain change temporally. Second, Fragile Intention (6.2.2) showed intention as intermittent rather than a prerequisite: stability is carried by routine and timing, with narratives of resolve often articulated afterwards. Third, What 'Counts' as Success? (6.2.3) demonstrated that what 'counted' depended entirely on how progress was measured – as an outcome or as a process – and on who was doing the counting. Finally, To Whom Must it 'Count'? (6.2.4) centred recognition, questioning what is measured, who is authorised to measure it, and how value is assigned to the fragile process of desistance.

What these accounts ultimately reveal is that desistance is not a singular turning point or static identity shift (Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), but a micro, moment-to-moment practice shaped by context and structure under conditions of constraint and fatigue. This challenges models that assign primacy to internal resolve (Giordano et al., 2002), to behavioural stability as trajectory (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Bushway et al., 2001), or to coherent identity narration (Maruna, 2001). In line with Bottoms et al. (2004) and Farrall & Calverley (2006), change is irregular and ambivalent; narratives often follow rather than precede practice (Farrall & Maruna, 2004). Recent work likewise foregrounds intermittence and relational volatility (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) and urges evaluative attention to the practices that shape time—routines, scaffolds, and the structuring of environments (Weaver, 2015; McNeill & Weaver, 2010; McNeill, 2006). Progress, therefore, may be *felt* without being fully visible, and *claimed* without being finally *achieved*; what matters analytically is the tempo and configuration through which behaviour is kept low-risk over time.

Taken together, these findings unsettle 'cessation-as-success' readings. Success is less 'has offending ceased?' than 'how is risk kept low, for how long, and by what routines and supports?' This temporal, situated evaluation also clarifies why recognition is frequently misaligned: tactics that most effectively sustain change are not always those most legible to formal measures, nor to men's own imagined scripts of transformation. This chapter advances practice-oriented desistance accounts by specifying the temporal

mechanics of change — how routines, resets, and exposure control operate over sequences and durations — and by showing why recognition is often misaligned across probation, researcher, and lived self-assessment at 18-month point.

Desistance, then, is not only about behaviour. It is about how behaviour is narrated, judged, and interpreted – by institutions, by one's community, by researchers, and by the men themselves. And these interpretations are not stable either. They shift temporally: in relation to past patterns, future hopes, present struggles, and the observer's frame of reference. At eighteen months, the question is not simply whether someone has desisted, but how desistance is being defined, operationalised, and made legible – and *by whom*. This raises further questions: Should we be measuring desistance at all? Who benefits from tracking behavioural change in this way? And what kinds of lives, efforts, and intentions get left out when we do? The following, concluding chapter (Chapter 7) takes up these questions directly.

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7.1 Revisiting the Framework

This study set out to explore the lived, micro-level realities of resettlement from prison, with the aim of capturing how change unfolds in the everyday, how internal and structural mechanisms interact, and how time and timing shape these processes. The methodological commitment has been to combine ethnographic detail with analytical attention to temporality, tracing how men leaving prison navigate the dislocations, compressions, and evaluative pressures of multiple temporal regimes.

The thesis has advanced a chronopolitical framework for understanding resettlement and desistance processes, grounded in the claim that time itself is a structuring condition of change. The analysis can be organised into four themes: time and fragility, temporal scaffolding, the slow work of change, and misaligned evaluations. Read together across Chapters 2–6, these themes show how lived tempos diverge from institutional calendars; how scaffolds stabilise yet expire; how sustaining change demands continuous, under-recognised labour; and how success is read differently across probation, researcher, and men themselves.

Chapter 2 (Pre-release) examines goal-setting framed through the evaluative gaze of programmes and probation, as men internalise stopwatch logics and narrate plans to anticipated scrutiny. Chapter 3 (Release) depicts compressed temporality, where dozens of bureaucratic tasks are condensed into a single day and where scaffolding becomes surveillance from the outset, rendering men vulnerable to failure under impossible timelines**.** Chapter 4 (First Month) analyses the first month's accommodation as conditional support that produces fragile stability—short contracts, nightly curfews, and compliance demands require continual recalibration of when to disclose, comply, or withdraw. Chapter 5 (The Long Run) follows men over time, showing how some scaffolds—housing, sobriety, relationships—operate as temporal anchors, while the expiry or thinning of other scaffolds generates drift and empty time. Chapter 6 (Desisted, 18 Months) interrogates what counts as success, demonstrating how men, the system, and the researcher judge

progress according to divergent clocks, and how fragile intent must be repeatedly renewed as circumstances and evaluations shift.

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to revisit each theme (7.1.1 - 7.1.4), in turn, interrogating its analytical purchase in light of the evidence presented across Chapters 2–6. A final subsection (7.1.5) reflects on the framework as a whole, asking how far the chronopolitics of desistance provides a robust lens for understanding the data, and where it may require further refinement. The aim is not to discard the framework but to sharpen it — asking whether it truly captures the lived complexity of change and specifying where it may need recalibration.

7.1.1 Time & Fragility

The first theme concerns the divergence of imposed institutional and lived tempos. Desistance does not unfold on an even or linear trajectory but is conditioned by multiple, overlapping temporal regimes: the stopwatch of probation and programme cycles, the compressed demands of bureaucratic processes, and the fragile rhythms of everyday survival. When these tempos diverge, perceived progress becomes precarious, as men find their efforts continually undermined or rendered invisible by misaligned evaluative clocks. Participants frequently experienced a mismatch between the pace at which institutions expected change and the slower, more erratic tempo at which they could realistically reorganise their lives. This mismatch was not merely frustrating; it could produce destabilisation. Conceptually, this theme consolidates penal time, waiting as governance and temporal compression: administrative schedules accelerate and fragment lived time; in Chapter 3 this appears as time–space compression and temporal discipline, in Chapters 4–5 temporal scaffolding and temporal anchors operate as partial correctives, and by Chapter 6 the double burden of time crystallises – setting up the chronopolitics of misaligned desistance mapped in §0.3.

The ethnography revealed this destabilisation at every stage. Pre-release (Chapter 2), men described goal-setting as a race against the probation "stopwatch," where the order and speed of achievements mattered as much as the achievements themselves. Reporting cycles and programme calendars installed weekly and monthly checkpoints that accelerated sequencing, privileging quick wins over consolidation. On the day of release, Chapter 3 showed how dozens of bureaucratic demands — housing, IDs, bank accounts — were compressed into a single day, setting men up to fail from the outset. In the First Month (Chapter 4), short contracts, curfews and conditionality created fragile stability that demanded continual recalibration of when to disclose, comply or withdraw. Over the longer run (Chapter 5), the thinning or expiry of scaffolding produced stretches of empty time and drift. By 18 Months (Chapter 6), divergent clocks across probation, researcher and men themselves produced conflicting readings of 'how well' someone was doing, requiring fragile intent to be renewed again and again.

The analysis also contributes to sociologies of time by showing how temporal regimes are implicated in the reproduction of inequality (Schweiger, 2025; Dewilde, 2003). Licence periods, benefit payment cycles, eviction notices, and court dates imposed an external rhythm that rarely matched participants' readiness or needs. These rhythms interacted with more intimate temporalities — the pacing of recovery, the slow rebuilding of trust — in ways that could either stabilise or destabilise progress. This insight is relevant not only to criminology but also to wider studies of welfare, housing, and health systems, where 'administrative time' and lived time frequently misalign.

This temporal framing also re-casts the phenomenon of drift, discussed in Chapter 6, as a product not solely of individual disengagement but of temporal misalignment. Men who had passed early 'tests' of success — securing housing, maintaining sobriety, avoiding breaches — often entered a period of existential uncertainty once formal supervision ended. The absence of clear next steps created a sense of deceleration or stasis, which in turn made them more vulnerable to relapse or re-offending. Such findings echo work that treats resettlement and desistance as temporal work—balancing present pressures against imagined futures (e.g. Hunter & Farrall, 2018; Halsey, Armstrong & Wright, 2017; Carlsson, 2012).

This first theme, of timing and fragility, therefore, shows how tempo misalignment makes progress fragile, but it should not be read as deterministically corrosive. Some men recalibrated rhythms rather than collapsed under them, using temporal gaps to pause, recover, or strategise. In this sense, divergence was often destabilising but could also create moments of reprieve or possibility.

7.1.2 Scaffolding vs Surveillance

The second theme concerns the conditionality of scaffolding. In much desistance literature, supports such as housing, treatment, supervision, or employment are framed as stabilising factors, offering footholds for change (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). This thesis confirms that scaffolding is crucial, but shows that it is always time-bound, conditional, and therefore precarious. The same supports that momentarily align lived and institutional tempos simultaneously plant the seeds of future fragility. Conceptually, the theme integrates temporal scaffolding and temporal anchors with penal time in the community, temporal discipline, chronocracy, and the double burden of time, showing that supports arrive with clocks, conditions, and monitoring that can steady progress while simultaneously tightening control.

The ethnography documented how housing, in particular, operated as a double-edged scaffold (Chapter 4). Tenancy contracts of a few weeks or months, nightly curfews, and constant monitoring stabilised men's immediate post-release trajectories while exposing them to the threat of sudden collapse. Approved Premises, for instance, offered a tightly controlled environment in which sobriety and compliance could be maintained, but their short stays forced men into cycles of repeated relocation. Similarly, council tenancies or supported housing created footholds but were shadowed by eviction risk, surveillance by staff, and the knowledge that stability was already running out. In this sense, housing operated less as a foundation than as a chain of temporary footholds, each demanding continuous recalibration of when to disclose, comply or withdraw.

By analysing desistance temporally — the daily, weekly, and monthly rhythms of decision-making and adaptation — this study complicates the idea of desistance as a steady accumulation of prosocial capital (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993). Participants' trajectories were punctuated by micro-events and mis-timed intersections: a housing offer arriving days too late to avert a relapse, a job interview coinciding with a court appearance, the expiry of a licence removing both surveillance and support. These moments reveal that the sustainability of change is not only about whether certain resources are available, but whether they are available when they are needed. In other words, scaffolding has a contradictory power – the power to stabilise and destabilise depending on timing and durability.

This dynamic was not unique to housing. Chapter 3 (Release) depicts time–space compression as dozens of bureaucratic tasks were packed into a single day, where "support" (appointments, checks, collections) was inseparable from surveillance under temporal discipline. Chapter 5 (The Long Run) shows scaffolding thinning into empty time, as some anchors (housing, sobriety, relationships) held while others expired. Chapter 6 (Eighteen Months) captures the cliff-edge of licence completion: men who had passed early tests of sobriety, housing, and compliance found themselves suddenly without structure, left to navigate empty time and drift.

The case of Aakesh illustrates this vividly. His determination to secure employment was initially sustained by RESTART's support and the apparent alignment of available scaffolds. Yet repeated rejections, combined with the precariousness of housing and benefits, produced drift rather than consolidation. The scaffold's expiry did not simply leave him unsupported; it actively undermined his progress, as expectations that had been raised under conditional support were dashed when those supports expired. By contrast, Joey's relocation succeeded precisely because scaffolding arrived at the right time and in the right form, amplifying an internal shift that was already underway. The contrast between these trajectories underscores the proposition's point: scaffolds can produce alignment, but only conditionally and temporarily.

This double character of scaffolding blurs the boundary between support and surveillance. Curfews, compliance checks, and monitoring are embedded within the very supports designed to stabilise. Men

frequently experienced these conditions as punitive rather than enabling. Several described housing contracts as "set-ups," where a missed appointment or minor breach could undo months of progress. Chapter 4 highlighted how this dynamic extended even to release itself: what appeared as supportive scaffolding on the first day was simultaneously a mechanism of surveillance, demanding immediate compliance under impossible timelines.

The analytical strength of this theme lies in its duality: scaffolding both enables and destabilises. It explains why men could appear to be stabilising in the short term but drift once conditions expired, and why success often felt precarious even when supports were in place. Yet, as with Proposition 1, qualification is required. Not all scaffolding produced drift; in some cases, its expiry coincided with men's readiness to sustain progress independently. Moreover, surveillance did not always undermine; for some, the watchful presence of probation or housing staff provided the external discipline needed to maintain stability. The theme therefore identifies a central tension rather than a universal outcome: scaffolding works, but only within the narrow temporal window in which conditionality, surveillance, and lived readiness briefly align.

7.1.3 The Slow Work of Change

The third theme highlights the centrality of emotional labour in sustaining fragile change. Desistance is not only about external scaffolds or behavioural compliance, but about the ongoing, interior work of managing cravings, enduring boredom, negotiating shame, and maintaining hope. This labour is slow, recursive, and difficult to observe. Precisely because it unfolds outside institutional metrics, it is systematically under-recognised in both policy and research. Conceptually, the theme integrates temporal scaffolding and anchors to demonstrate how men use small, repeatable acts to convert open time into owned time and refrain from drifting into empty time.

Evidence across chapters shows this labour operating alongside — and often underneath — visible milestones. Chapter 3 (Release) places intense self-regulation against time–space compression, as men

absorb setbacks and keep moving through crowded bureaucratic sequences. Chapter 4 (Housing) situates emotional labour within conditional accommodation — curfews, checks and ever-present eviction risk — where staying sober, de-escalating conflict and deciding when to disclose or withdraw constitute daily work. Chapter 5 (The Long Run) shows how routines, sobriety practices and prosocial ties act as temporal anchors — buffering men from setbacks but requiring continuous upkeep. Chapter 6 (18 Months) highlights how, as formal structure thins, fragile intent must be renewed in stretches of empty time, with men managing drift, disappointment and the loss of externally imposed rhythm.

Much of this labour remains methodologically quiet. Even in this study, such work was only visible when men chose to narrate it. I was not present to witness Peter's nightly negotiations with himself (3.1.3) or the 48 hours Ant spent trying to get himself arrested (4.12); I only encountered these acts retrospectively, in their retelling. As a result, much emotional labour inevitably went unrecorded. The most this thesis can do is hypothesise why these efforts might have gone unreported – masculine codes discouraging disclosure, men's perceived judgement of what 'matters' to share to a researcher, etc. But the silence itself became data. The absence of disclosure marked the presence of labour too intimate, too routine, or too inconsequential to be voiced. What remained unsaid — the uncounted negotiations, the quiet endurance, the repeated acts of holding back — constituted the very texture of desistance. Emotional labour therefore exists not only in the words men offered, but in what they intentionally or unintentionally didn't offer. The result is a troubling paradox. The very work that sustains desistance — resisting relapse, holding despair at bay, recalibrating expectations — is precisely what disappears from view and therefore recognition. Institutional markers reward punctuality, abstinence, employment, and compliance; they do not record the unseen effort that makes those outcomes possible or delays their unravelling. This is why, as Chapter 6 emphasised, relapse or disengagement often signalled not a lack of effort but the exhaustion of sustaining unobservable change under conditions of scarcity.

This theme foregrounds the labour that sustains desistance as temporal work: slow, hidden, easily exhausted, and often inaudible. This work is carried in silence, in omissions, and in the ordinary routines

of getting through the day. It does not conform to institutional tempos or measurable outcomes, yet it is precisely what keeps trajectories from unravelling. In recognising this invisible labour, the process of desistance is revealed as the accumulation of insignificant, messy, unseen, everyday actions and inactions — work that goes unrecognised and unrewarded, but without which change would not be possible.

Yet this proposition also requires caution. Emotional labour cannot be fully accessed, even ethnographically. It risks being over-claimed if inferred too broadly from silence. What this study can show is only a partial record: glimpses into the effort that men revealed, contextualised within wider patterns of strain and survival. Recognising emotional labour, then, is less about quantifying it than about acknowledging its necessary but under-valued role in sustaining desistance.

7.1.4 Misalignment

In the post-release landscape documented here, 'success' was not a neutral description of progress but a relational construct, produced through the interaction of institutional design, researcher interpretation, and men's self-evaluations. Benchmarks such as stable housing, lawful conduct, and sustained employment emerged from the operational logics of probation, housing providers, and resettlement programmes. They were tied to funding cycles, risk management protocols, and performance metrics — what Shore and Wright (1997) term the "audit culture" of governance[28]. These measures carried material weight: meeting them could secure continued access to scarce resources; failing them could trigger eviction, recall, or exclusion from services. Conceptually, the theme integrates misaligned evaluations within a broader chronopolitics of misaligned desistance, linking audit culture to temporal resources, temporal scaffolding and the double burden of time — showing how institutional clocks and categories redistribute recognition and support.

[28] See also Strathern (2000).

Temporal alignment emerged as a decisive factor. Institutional measures were often short-horizon: three-month tenancy sustainment, six months without breach, 12 weeks in work. These intervals rarely matched the slower rhythms of recovery, identity reconstruction, and social reintegration. Success, therefore, had a timeframe, turning behavioural change from a fluid, evolving process into a countdown, where progress was either validated or discounted according to how quickly and in what order it occurred. Two problems follow:

First, the metrics used to measure success are often simplified and inadequate. Critical accounts (e.g. McNeill, 2019) suggest that the fixation on quantifying desistance — particularly through recidivism rates — may obscure more than it reveals. My findings align with this scepticism. As Chapter 6 shows, fixed measurement windows produce false positives (apparent stability masking fragility) and false negatives (slow but meaningful change mislabelled as failure). Some of the most valuable insights surfaced when outcomes were not the focal point at all, but when we attended to textures, contradictions and improvisations in everyday life.

The second, and perhaps larger, issue is the meaning being made by the metrics themselves. Importantly, men didn't passively absorb these metrics – they negotiated, internalised, and sometimes resisted them. Some used early post-release narratives around "ticking the boxes" — job, housing, probation compliance — as confirmation they were "on the right path." Others negotiated with institutional definitions of success, reframing them to suit their circumstances: Elliot described precarious, sometimes unsafe housing as "stable" because he controlled the tenancy; Malik interpreted intermittent casual work as "freedom" rather than instability. Others, however, were left judging their efforts as 'fraudulent' when the internalised metrics meant they were not desisting 'correctly'.

Scholarly habits can amplify this problem. When individuals measure themselves against idealised trajectories of transformation – often pioneered and purported by scholarship – they may come to see ordinary setbacks or slow progress as evidence of personal deficiency. This is not simply a by-product of policy rhetoric; it is a problem reproduced by research itself. By privileging neat categories, linear

narratives, and measurable endpoints, scholars risk moralising what is, in reality, an uneven and iterative process. In doing so, we can inadvertently script people into seeing themselves as failing – even when their daily lives are filled with small acts of restraint, adaptation, and endurance – thereby reinforcing the very sense of inadequacy and marginalisation our work seeks to address.

The problem, therefore, is not only that current measures are inadequate, but that the act of measuring in this way actively shapes the desistance and resettlement process — redistributing resources, influencing self-narratives, and producing strategic compliance. And if success is defined in ways that serve institutional performance metrics, rather than lived stability, alignment fractures: the system may record success where men feel failure or vice versa. This incongruence compounds fragility and raises the central question: who is this measurement for?

These conclusions point towards methodological and conceptual shifts. Longitudinal ethnography — with its capacity to capture both micro-temporal fluctuations and long-term arcs — should be a central tool in future resettlement research. Comparative ethnographies across jurisdictions could reveal how different policy logics, welfare regimes, and penal cultures shape the lived meanings of success.

This temporal lens also re-casts the phenomenon of drift, discussed in Chapter 6, as a product not solely of individual disengagement but of recognition misalignment. Men who had passed early ‘tests’ of success — securing housing, maintaining sobriety, avoiding breaches — often entered a period of existential uncertainty once formal supervision ended. The absence of clear next steps created a sense of deceleration or stasis, which in turn made them more vulnerable to relapse or re-offending.

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(2014) observation that desistance involves managing not just behaviour, but the subjective experience of time itself.

This theme captures the ways in which recognition misalignment destabilises desistance. Its strength lies in showing that sustainability of behavioural change depends not on progress alone, but on alignment between institutional, researcher, and lived evaluations of progress. Yet its limitation is that this misalignment must not always be destructive. Some men leveraged the gaps between standpoints to their advantage — strategically "ticking boxes" to satisfy probation while pursuing alternative personal goals. In this sense, misalignment could also create space for agency, even if precarious. Recognising both sides of this dynamic is crucial: evaluative incongruence is often destabilising, but it can sometimes provide room to manoeuvre within otherwise rigid systems.

7.1.5 Revisiting the Framework

In theoretical terms, the chronopolitical framework advanced here offers a corrective to models that treat time as linear, neutral, or merely a backdrop to change. Across four themes, the analysis shows that resettlement is structured by: (i) time and fragility — tempo divergence between institutional clocks and lived rhythms; (ii) scaffolding vs surveillance — conditional supports that stabilise yet destabilise; (iii) the slow work of change — emotional labour that sustains progress while disappearing from view; and (iv) misaligned evaluations — divergent readings of success across system, researcher and self. Taken together, these themes shift desistance from a question of motivation and opportunity to one of pacing, recognition, and negotiation across multiple temporal regimes.

The strength of the framework lies in its capacity to foreground temporality not as incidental but as constitutive. It recasts relapse and drift as products of misalignment rather than moral or motivational failure, and it illuminates the paradoxes whereby the very supports designed to sustain resettlement also

destabilise it. It also highlights a domain of invisible labour that rarely enters scholarly or institutional accounts, and it shows how sustainability ultimately depends on alignment across standpoints. Conceptually, the framework draws on a number of concepts from the sociology of time to form a toolkit for analysing how institutional calendars interact with lived time during the process of resettlement.

Yet the framework has limits. It risks understating the role of agency in exploiting temporal gaps or in resisting evaluative clocks altogether. While it explains much of the instability observed across the study, it cannot account for every instance of adaptation, resilience, or defiance. Future research should therefore test these propositions against other contexts, to see where they hold, where they collapse, and where they need rethinking.

By integrating this temporal analysis into the broader conceptualisation of resettlement and desistance, the thesis contributes a more granular understanding of change as something paced, fragile, and continually negotiated in relation to institutional calendars as much as to structural conditions and personal resolve. In this sense, the chronopolitical framework is not a replacement for existing theories but a lens that reveals dimensions otherwise obscured: the lived politics of time. This sets the stage for the next section, which considers how the chronopolitical framework interacts with, extends, and challenges existing theories of desistance — from life-course sequencing and turning-point models to accounts of narrative identity and social capital.

7.2 Theoretical Contribution

This section situates the empirical findings and the chronopolitical framework within wider resettlement and desistance scholarship, considering how they contribute to sociological understandings of behavioural change more broadly. It revisits canonical and contemporary theories of desistance, highlighting points of convergence as well as areas where the data complicates or challenges existing models. It then outlines the

distinctive theoretical contribution offered by a chronopolitical perspective, demonstrating how attention to time reshapes what we can know about the process of resettlement.

7.2.1 Intent, Opportunity, Time: Which Comes First?

Desistance scholarship has been shaped by a set of influential theoretical models that seek to explain how and why people stop offending. Among the most widely cited is Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) 'identity theory of desistance', positing that intent is a necessary precondition for taking up opportunity.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009) theorise that a 'crystallisation of discontent' prompts a cognitive shift towards a pro-social identity, which then guides behavioural change. In their model, intent precedes opportunity; the internal decision to 'go straight' triggers the pursuit of structural supports such as employment or housing. Yet the longitudinal ethnography presented here reveals multiple cases where this sequence is reversed, or where opportunity exists in the absence of prior intent. In Chapter 3 (Day of Release), for instance, several participants entered supported accommodation not because of an articulated commitment to change, but because it was the default housing option on licence. The men's trajectories echo critiques by Farrall et al. (2014) and Nugent and Schinkel (2016), who caution against treating intent as a fixed precondition rather than an emergent property of social context and relational commitments. Conversely, Aakesh's narrative (5.1.2) illustrates the fragility of high initial motivation when structural scaffolding collapses. Despite clear intent to desist upon release, repeated job rejections undermined his self-worth, culminating in relapse and disengagement.

The analysis builds on Farrall and Calverley's (2006) work on 'temporal alignment' — the alignment of internal readiness with external opportunity — by showing how this alignment often fails, even for highly motivated participants. Across the study, moments of intent frequently preceded the arrival of material scaffolding or supports arrived only after motivation had waned. Aakesh's early post-release determination to find work, documented in 5.1.2, dissipated after months of rejections and precarious housing, illustrating how the order in which events unfold can profoundly affect momentum. Conversely, in Joey's case (5.1.1),

relocation to a safer area occurred at a moment when he was already distancing himself from old networks, allowing structural change to amplify rather than frustrate internal shifts.

When you adopt a micro scale, such as in this study, intent is neither a universal starting point nor a guarantee of durability. For some men, change was initially incidental: a by-product of staying occupied with housing moves or volunteering shifts, as with Pat's 'snapping' (6.1.3), whose desistance became more intentional only once stability was established. For most others, strong early intent eroded when employment or housing goals repeatedly failed, leading to relapse or recall despite initial willingness and inclination. This suggests that the interaction between internal resolve and external conditions is not sequential but recursive. Early in the journey, internal motivation may be high but structurally unsupported; later, structural stability may exist without a sustaining sense of purpose. At the micro level, the *fit* between these factors changes over time, producing phases of progress, stagnation, or regression. In sociological terms, the process resembled what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call 'agentic improvisation' — contingent, situated responses to shifting structural and temporal contexts — rather than the pursuit of a stable, long-term project of transformation.

Analytically, therefore, these findings challenge the presumption in much desistance theory that intentional cognitive transformation precedes behavioural change (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Maruna, 2001), instead aligning with Giordano et al.'s (2002) argument that cognitive transformations are 'hooks for change' rather than guarantees of sustained desistance, and require continual reinforcement over time.

7.2.2 Beyond the Binary: The 'Desisting While Offending' Paradox

A critical empirical insight that emerges from the data is that participants could be understood as both desisting and offending at the same time. This challenges the dichotomous logic underpinning much

criminological and policy thinking, where offending is presumed to signify the absence of desistance and non-offending is taken as evidence of its presence — an assumption embedded in life-course criminology (e.g. Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003; also Farrington & West, 1995), identity-based models of change (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), and the operational metrics of criminal justice policy, where recidivism rates or breach records are taken as definitive indicators of failure (Russells & Bonta, 2010). Instead, the data suggest a more complex reality: behavioural change is often partial, domain-specific, and embedded in competing structural and relational pressures.

Canonical desistance frameworks tend to conceptualise offending and non-offending as sequential stages: an offending phase gives way to a non-offending phase, with perhaps a transitional lull in between. Yet as demonstrated in Chapters 4–6, this framing obscures the lived messiness and inconsistent nature of change.

For instance, due to the 'Scarcity, Waiting, and Structural Squeeze' described in 4.2.1, some participants maintained steady employment and avoided drug use for several months, but occasionally engaged in low-level acquisitive crime to supplement incomes when wages proved insufficient to meet basic living costs. In Chapter 6 What 'Counts' as Success?, Pat described himself as "keeping out of trouble" while openly acknowledging minor infractions that he did not view as criminally significant. In both cases, men were actively investing in stabilising behaviours while engaging in low-risk or low-level offending. McNeill (2016) has argued for understanding desistance as 'desisting from crime' rather than 'having desisted', emphasising its status as a process rather than an outcome. This processual view makes space for the coexistence of progress and regression, recognising that the same individual may embody elements of both 'success' and 'failure' at different moments and in different domains.

The 'desisting while offending' paradox illustrates an institutional misreading of progress. The paradox is further complicated by how institutions define and respond to breaches of licence conditions or minor offences. Policy frameworks often treat any breach as a sign of "risk escalation," prompting recall to custody. Yet the data reveal instances where breaches were adaptive responses to structural hazards. One man, for example, deliberately breached curfew to escape a violent incident in his housing unit, resulting

in recall despite the absence of any new criminal offence. Another was recalled for failing to attend probation appointments due to shift work obligations – a direct consequence of gaining legitimate employment. These cases mirror findings by Hucklesby (2013) on the punitive potential of licence enforcement, where rigid compliance regimes can undermine rather than support reintegration. Such institutional responses can produce a form of false negative: interpreting adaptive or situationally constrained behaviour as indicative of criminogenic intent. This not only misrepresents the individual's trajectory but can actively destabilise it, eroding the structural and relational gains they have made.

In this framework, partial compliance qualifies as 'progress'. Recognising partial compliance as progress aligns with arguments by Maruna and Farrall (2004) that small, incremental changes can be significant in contexts of entrenched disadvantage. In the narratives presented here, ceasing high-harm or high-frequency offending – even if replaced by occasional low-level offences – marked a substantial shift in lifestyle and identity. For men with long histories of chaotic offending, the capacity to maintain a stable address, reduce drug use, and limit offending to sporadic acts represented a considerable achievement, even if it fell short of legal definitions of desistance (Loeber & LeBlanc, 1998; Leibrich, 1993). Temporally, these partial gains may act as stepping stones towards fuller disengagement from crime. Many scholars have noted that behavioural change often proceeds unevenly, with periods of consolidation followed by relapses or plateaus (Hareven & Masaoka, 1988; Foote & Frank, 1999). The participants' narratives support this, showing that intermittent offending did not necessarily signify a return to previous patterns but could instead be part of a longer, non-linear adjustment.

Theoretically, the 'desisting while offending' paradox invites a reconceptualization of desistance not as a categorical status but as a spectrum of behaviours, intentions, and circumstances – perhaps even reimagining it to encompass broader processes of resettlement, re-entry and release. This spectrum approach has affinities with Sampson and Laub's (2003) emphasis on cumulative continuity, but shifts the focus from formal markers (e.g., marriage, work) to micro-level behavioural adjustments that may occur independently of such bonds. It also underscores the need to disentangle intent from compliance: a breach

of licence conditions may reflect structural incompatibility between institutional demands and the individual's life circumstances, rather than a lack of intent to change. This point aligns with Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) critique of the moralising tendencies in desistance discourse, where 'good' change is conflated with conformity to state logics.

For policy, embracing a spectrum model would require rethinking enforcement practices to allow for proportional responses to minor breaches and to recognise domain-specific progress. This could mean, for example, differentiating between breaches linked to new offending and those linked to competing responsibilities or safety concerns.

Ultimately, the 'desisting while offending' paradox forces both researchers and practitioners to hold in view the contradictions inherent in the desistance and resettlement process. The participants in this study were often *both* reducing their criminal involvement and engaging in acts that legally or formally counted as offending. Acknowledging this complexity does not mean excusing harmful behaviour, but it does mean resisting simplistic binaries that fail to capture the lived realities of change. By documenting and theorising these in-between states, this thesis contributes to an emerging strand of resettlement scholarship that foregrounds partial, messy, and sometimes contradictory progress (Leibrich, 1993; McNeill, 2016; Farrall et al., 2014; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). In doing so, it challenges both the punitive rigidity of recall practices and the narrative neatness of canonical models, offering instead a vision of resettlement as a fragile, effortful, and context-dependent process.

7.2.3 Scaffolding vs Surveillance as a Temporal Switch

One of the central contributions of this thesis is to show that the relationship between scaffolding and surveillance is not static but temporal. In desistance scholarship, scaffolding has typically been treated as the stabilising counterpart to surveillance: structures such as housing, welfare, and probation are celebrated for offering the conditions necessary to sustain change, even as other dimensions of supervision are

criticised for their punitive and controlling effects. This binary framing risks overlooking how supports and controls are not simply parallel features of resettlement but can function as sequential states. What initially appears as scaffolding may, over time, be revealed as surveillance, depending on how long it lasts, the conditionalities it carries, and the moment at which it is withdrawn.

This reframing builds directly on the work of Crewe (2011), who characterises penal power in terms of its depth, weight, and tightness, and on Robinson's (2013) account of responsibilisation in probation, where individuals are compelled to demonstrate autonomy through compliance with institutional demands. Both perspectives emphasise the tension between care and control, but they remain largely synchronic, treating scaffolding and surveillance as co-present features of supervision. By contrast, the chronopolitical perspective advanced here foregrounds time as the mechanism of their conversion**:** scaffolding stabilises only while timelines hold, but the very conditions that enable stability eventually flip into destabilisation once deadlines expire or conditions tighten.

The ethnographic material offers repeated illustrations of this temporal switch. Chapter 3 captured it most vividly in the compressed temporality of the first 24 hours after release. On paper, this moment was designed to scaffold resettlement: men were accompanied by probation, offered pathways to housing and welfare, and enrolled in resettlement planning. In practice, the sheer density of bureaucratic demands — bank accounts, housing appointments, benefit claims — transformed scaffolding into surveillance. To fail at one appointment was to risk breaching licence conditions; to miss one deadline was to be seen as resistant or non-compliant. The same structures that were supposed to enable stability generated new risks because they were compressed into impossibly short timescales. Support became indistinguishable from supervision, and supervision indistinguishable from surveillance.

Housing was another critical site where scaffolding and surveillance overlapped and shifted. Chapter 4 documented men's experiences in precarious state housing, Approved Premises, and street-level survival. Each setting provided a temporary scaffold: a roof, access to benefits, a foothold from which to attempt

sobriety or employment. Yet each was also structured by rigid temporal conditions. Approved Premises imposed nightly curfews and disciplinary rules; council or hostel housing was tied to probationary tenancies or short leases; sofa-surfing and rough sleeping were always precarious, subject to eviction at a moment's notice. Men repeatedly described these arrangements as 'set up to fail': they were given just enough stability to prevent collapse, but never long enough to build durable progress. As one participant put it, "you're only ever on borrowed time." In this way, scaffolding was not simply fragile but time-bound, and its expiry transformed support into risk.

The long run offered further evidence of this temporal switch. By Chapter 5, many men had passed the initial markers of success: they had avoided immediate relapse, maintained housing, or complied with licence. Yet when supervision ended, scaffolding vanished abruptly, leaving behind what participants described as a "cliff edge." Aakesh's experience illustrates the destabilising effect of this withdrawal. Initially buoyed by scaffolds of housing and sobriety, his determination unravelled when repeated job rejections and the expiry of formal supports left him directionless. What had seemed stabilising in the short term revealed itself to be unsustainable in the long run. By contrast, Joey's relocation to a safer area functioned as a scaffold precisely because it coincided with his own readiness to disengage from old networks. The durability of scaffolding was not intrinsic but dependent on timing and alignment.

Analytically, this demonstrates why scaffolding cannot be understood apart from surveillance. The two are intertwined not only in content but in tempo. The very supports that resettlement programmes provide — housing contracts, probation appointments, benefit claims — are also surveillance mechanisms because they are conditional, monitored, and time-limited. Their stabilising function is inseparable from their disciplinary logic. Men must comply with rules, attend appointments, and meet deadlines in order to retain access to resources. In this way, scaffolding both sustains and unsettles. It offers footholds, but on the condition that men perform compliance to institutional clocks. When those clocks run out, scaffolding collapses into surveillance, and the absence of stability is reframed as individual failure.

The theoretical implication is that supervision should be rethought not only in terms of its substance but also its sequencing. Time is the mechanism through which scaffolding becomes surveillance. Early optimism and stability can be undone not because supports were absent but because they were withdrawn too soon, compressed into unsustainable demands, or burdened with conditions that guaranteed eventual breach. This reframing extends existing debates on supervision by demonstrating that the scaffolding/surveillance binary is misleading: the two are best understood as temporally contingent states, continually shifting depending on duration, conditionality, and alignment with lived rhythms.

A further implication is that short-term stability cannot be read as evidence of long-term sustainability. Men may appear to succeed within institutional calendars — three months housed, six months breach-free — while in fact remaining highly vulnerable to collapse once scaffolds expire. Conversely, some apparent failures may reflect not motivational deficits but the expiry of scaffolds that were always too fragile to sustain desistance. By treating scaffolding as time-bound rather than permanent, the chronopolitical perspective complicates dominant accounts of 'what works' in resettlement. It suggests that success cannot be measured by whether scaffolds are in place at a given moment, but by whether they endure long enough to become lived stability rather than conditional survival.

In sum, the evidence across Chapters 2–6 reveals that scaffolding and surveillance are not discrete domains but temporal states, continually switching as supports expire, conditionalities tighten, or institutional clocks outrun lived tempos. Recognising this temporal switch deepens our current understanding of supervision and resettlement (Crewe, 2011; Robinson, 2013), showing that the very supports celebrated in policy and scholarship may simultaneously destabilise the lives they aim to sustain.

7.2.4 Micro-Temporality as a Theoretical Lens

Most desistance research has treated time as a background variable — an axis along which turning points, maturational processes, or cognitive shifts are charted (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Maruna, 2001). The unit of analysis is typically years, or life-course stages. What is obscured in this framing are the small, short-term negotiations through which lives are actually held together or allowed to unravel. By contrast, the longitudinal ethnographic approach used in this study foregrounds what might be called the micro-temporality of desistance and resettlement: the daily, weekly, and monthly rhythms of waiting, relapse, recalibration, and endurance. At this scale, it becomes possible to observe how sequencing and timing actively shape the possibilities of change. A housing offer that arrives a week too late, a probation deadline that collides with a job interview, a licence that expires before sobriety stabilises — each of these small misalignments can have disproportionate effects. They do not appear in recidivism statistics or policy reports, but they decisively alter momentum. Methodologically, a micro-temporal lens reframes the very object of study. By focusing on the minute scales at which daily life unfolds, the analysis demonstrates that desistance is not simply a gradual accumulation of social capital, but a fragile process paced through waiting, relapse, recalibration, and endurance. At this level of granularity, the sequencing and timing of events become central explanatory variables.

Theoretically, this approach aligns with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conception of agency as temporally embedded and improvisational. Participants were not simply choosing to desist or persist once and for all; they were continually adapting to shifting rhythms of scarcity, surveillance, and support. It also echoes Haney's (2006) analysis of welfare precarity, where administrative calendars discipline daily survival, and Healy's (2014) work on desistance as the management of subjective time. By connecting these insights, this thesis extends criminology's engagement with the sociology of time, showing how administrative regimes impose temporalities that rarely match lived ones, and how individuals improvise to bridge the gap.

What this study demonstrates is that the process of desistance, or more broadly resettlement, is not best captured in terms of outcomes or endpoints, but in terms of pacing. The close, ethnographic lens makes visible how men sustained themselves in the intervals between official markers: resisting cravings in the silence of long nights, rationing resources until the next benefit cycle, improvising ways to avoid conflict on the wing. Much of this work existed outside the gaze of institutions, probation, or even the researcher, but it was precisely here that desistance was negotiated. In this sense, micro-temporality is not just an analytic refinement but a methodological intervention and theoretical lens through which desistance can be re-examined. It demands that researchers attend to scale, recognising that the sustainability of change is as much about timing as it is about intent or opportunity. It also suggests that desistance theory must account for these short temporal rhythms if it is to capture the fragility and unevenness of lived change.

7.2.5 Carceral Logics

Desistance does not unfold in a vacuum; it is mediated through the frameworks, demands, and evaluative criteria imposed by criminal justice institutions. In England's post-release landscape, these criteria are shaped by what can be described as 'carceral logics' (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007) — ways of defining, measuring, and enforcing 'success' that are rooted in the penal system's priorities rather than in the lived realities of adaptation after prison. These logics pervade both the formal mechanisms of licence supervision and the informal expectations that participants internalise over time.

One central feature of carceral logics is the imposition of narrow, binary indicators of success and failure, such as compliance with licence conditions, absence of reconviction, or visible participation in prosocial activities like employment. As McNeill and Weaver (2010) note, these state-defined markers are rarely sensitive to the subtleties of personal progress, partial change, or harm reduction. In this study, men frequently achieved significant personal milestones — reducing substance use, avoiding high-risk

associates, maintaining stable housing — yet these gains often remained invisible to the system if they were accompanied by minor breaches or non-compliance.

The analysis across Chapters 4-6 shows how these metrics become internalised, shaping how men self-assess their own progress. This echoes Farrall et al.'s (2014) argument that people under supervision often come to measure themselves against institutional yardsticks, even when those metrics conflict with their own goals or realities. In Chapter 2 (Pre-release), many participants articulated aspirations that mirrored institutional expectations — for instance, King spoke about returning to education, while Darren described wanting a house, a job, and a family — suggesting that policy logics around success can pre-emptively structure how men imagine their futures.

Carceral logics also operate temporally, structuring change into administratively convenient stages that do not necessarily align with the rhythms of resettlement. The 'cliff-edge' experienced at the end of licence (Chapters 5 and 6) illustrates how these temporal boundaries can disrupt progress: men were expected to demonstrate stability up to a fixed date, after which supervision — and much of the scaffolding — abruptly ended. This compressed timeframe often prioritised short-term compliance over the cultivation of long-term resilience.

Importantly, carceral logics do not merely constrain; they actively produce certain forms of resettlement while foreclosing others. Men learned to perform compliance in ways that satisfied formal criteria without necessarily deepening underlying change — a practice hinted at in Maruna and Farrall's (2004) distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' desistance, but here observed in the day-to-day adaptations participants made to 'look good' to probation or housing officers. The result was a skewed ecology of change in which the performance of prosocial behaviour could mask ongoing vulnerabilities, while quiet, less visible forms of self-management (e.g., avoiding certain streets or contacts) went unrecognised.

The broader sociological contribution here is a critical reframing of how the state's evaluative gaze shapes resettlement and desistance processes. Rather than viewing carceral metrics as neutral or benign, this study

positions them as active forces that channel effort toward particular, recognisable forms of progress and away from others. The men's narratives reveal how deeply these logics penetrate, sometimes becoming indistinguishable from their own aspirations. This complicates any straightforward reading of motivation or relapse: what appears as a failure may be a refusal or inability to conform to an imposed metric, while what appears as success may be a strategic adaptation to an unhelpful evaluative regime.

By foregrounding the influence of carceral logics, this thesis adds to a growing body of work (e.g., Robinson, 2014; McNeill et al., 2012) that critiques the managerial rationalities of probation and post-release supervision. It shows that understanding desistance requires not only examining individual agency and structural opportunity, but also interrogating the institutional frameworks that define what counts as change — and, crucially, *whose* change counts.

7.2.6 Beyond Desistance: Structural Violence and the Sociology of Change

While this thesis is situated within and contributes substantively to desistance scholarship, its implications reach far beyond debates about offending cessation. At its core, the analysis is an ethnography of behavioural change under conditions of structural violence. The men's post-release lives unfolded within a social order marked by austerity-driven welfare retrenchment, punitive housing regimes, precarious labour markets, and a criminal justice system that both monitors and withholds support. These conditions are not simply backdrops to the desistance process — they are active forces that shape its possibilities and vulnerabilities.

The concept of 'structural violence' (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2004) is useful here: the harm participants experienced was often not the result of discrete interpersonal actions, but of social arrangements that systematically disadvantaged them while appearing bureaucratically neutral. Re-entry into a structurally

hostile landscape (Chapters 3 and 4), the withdrawal of housing support upon minor non-compliance (Chapters 4 and 5), the bureaucratic inaccessibility of employment programmes (Chapter 5), and the abrupt termination of supervision and scaffolding at licence expiry (Chapters 5 and 6) are examples of institutional practices that perpetuated insecurity. These harms are slow-moving, diffuse, and frequently invisible to policymakers, yet they fundamentally restructured the terrain on which behavioural change was attempted.

By tracing the micro-temporal dynamics of adaptation within these contexts, the thesis engages with wider sociological debates about change under constraint. In doing so, it aligns with scholarship on the 'slow violence' of neoliberal restructuring (Nixon, 2011) and the 'everyday violence' embedded in welfare and penal bureaucracies (Wacquant, 2009; Cooper & Whyte, 2017). The men's efforts to maintain sobriety, secure housing, or avoid re-offending were not just matters of personal will; they were continual acts of negotiation with a system whose logics often undermined their stated goals.

Finally, by situating the men's stories in this broader frame, the thesis makes a case for moving beyond criminology's narrow preoccupation with "desistance" as an endpoint. The more pressing sociological question becomes: what does it mean to *attempt* change in a structurally hostile environment? Addressing this requires a shift from individualised interventions to structural reforms that make stability possible — reforms in housing policy, labour markets, welfare provision, and post-release supervision. Without such changes, the men's experiences suggest that desistance will remain, for many, less of a destination than an ongoing struggle for survival within a structurally violent order.

7.3 Directions for Future Research

The findings of this thesis point to several avenues for extending both empirical research and theoretical development. This section highlights new directions that emerge from adopting a chronopolitical framework of desistance. Four domains in particular merit attention: the measurement of alignment, comparative chronopolitics, cross-domain studies of constrained change, and long-term consolidation.

7.3.1 Measuring Alignment

A central implication of this study is the need to move beyond outcome-based metrics such as recidivism rates or programme completion, towards instruments capable of capturing *temporal fit*. Existing measures focus on whether housing, employment, or abstinence are achieved, but not on whether these resources arrive at the right time, in the right sequence, or at a pace that individuals can sustain. A chronopolitical perspective suggests that it is not the simple presence or absence of supports that matters most, but their alignment with lived rhythms of readiness and capacity. The alignment measures proposed here build directly on the chronopolitical alignment matrices operationalised in Section 1.3.3 (see also Figure 5).

Four dimensions could provide the basis for future methodological development: First, sequencing indices could be designed to track whether critical supports occur in a sequence that enables rather than undermines stability. For example, participants in this study often obtained housing after their employment hopes had already collapsed, or received probation deadlines before they had the basic documentation needed to comply. Such mis-sequencing created unnecessary crises. A systematic way of coding sequencing could reveal how often supports are mistimed, and with what consequences.

Second, density scores could measure the weekly accumulation of micro-obligations — probation meetings, benefit appointments, job searches, treatment groups. For men balancing multiple forms of supervision and welfare conditionality, the cumulative weight of obligations often made even modest progress fragile. Capturing density empirically would make it possible to quantify when obligation loads cross thresholds that are unsustainable, an idea that resonates with ethnographic findings on probation ‘overload’ and the destabilising effect of dense supervisory calendars (McCulloch, 2005)..

Third, a windowing approach could examine the duration of supports relative to individual trajectories. This study showed how short housing contracts or the expiry of licence periods often produced cliff-edge

effects, removing scaffolds just as participants were beginning to stabilise. Analysing how long supports persist past initial stability — whether weeks, months, or years — would provide a clearer picture of how scaffolds consolidate or unravel over time. Comparable "cliff-edge" effects have been documented in re-entry studies where withdrawal of supervision or welfare support undermines fragile progress (National Institute of Justice, 2021).

Finally, recognition concordance measures could assess the degree of alignment between the evaluations of men, probation officers, and researchers. As Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated, men frequently saw themselves as progressing even when probation registers recorded breaches, or conversely judged themselves as failing even when official measures marked stability. Capturing these divergences systematically could reveal not only the prevalence of misalignment but its consequences for motivation, identity, and resource allocation — a pattern well recognised in narrative desistance scholarship (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; see also Tietjen, 2019).

Together, these instruments would shift the empirical study of desistance away from static outcomes towards dynamic processes of alignment and misalignment. They would allow researchers to see when progress is precarious not because resources are absent, but because they arrive in the wrong order, at the wrong density, or without concordance in recognition.

7.3.2 Comparative Chronopolitics

The chronopolitical framework also opens space for comparative inquiry. While this thesis has traced misalignments within the temporal regimes of probation, housing, and welfare in England, the forms these misalignments take are shaped by jurisdictional variation. Different states and penal systems impose distinct calendars: licence lengths vary from weeks to years; housing security can be short-term or indefinite; welfare systems pay benefits monthly, fortnightly, or not at all. Each produces a different temporal scaffolding within which desistance must be attempted.

Comparative chronopolitics would involve mapping these institutional calendars and examining how they interact with lived tempos of recovery, adaptation, and survival. For instance, jurisdictions with shorter licence periods may reduce the intensity of surveillance but also increase the cliff-edge effect when supervision ends. Conversely, regimes with extended licence durations may provide longer scaffolding but entrench the pressures of conditionality, leaving men living under perpetual compliance. Similarly, welfare regimes differ in their cycles of payment and review: some synchronise with lived needs, others amplify precarity by leaving individuals in prolonged periods of waiting. Such comparisons would allow scholars to test whether the misalignments observed in this study — such as the mismatch between probation's compressed demands and the slower rhythms of stabilisation, or the abrupt withdrawal of housing supports — are universal or context-specific. Multi-site ethnographies could track how men improvise in the face of different administrative calendars, and whether certain institutional designs enable closer alignment between lived and system time.

Comparative chronopolitics also invites cross-national theorising. In Nordic countries, for example, longer-term welfare provision may offer a more stable temporal scaffold for desistance, while in punitive regimes with truncated support, men may be forced into constant improvisation. These differences are not just policy variations but temporal architectures: they condition how lives unfold, how futures are imagined, and how progress is recognised. By situating desistance within these comparative frames, future research can show how penal and welfare institutions do not simply shape opportunities but also orchestrate the very pacing of change. A comparative chronopolitics would therefore contribute both to desistance scholarship and to the sociology of the state, revealing how governance operates through calendars as much as through laws or practices.

7.3.3 Cross-Domain Change under Constraint

The chronopolitical lens also suggests the value of studying desistance alongside other domains of long-term, fragile change. Recovery from addiction, the management of chronic illness, and the experience of long-term unemployment each involve slow, uneven progress sustained through continual effort in the face of structural constraints. These domains share with desistance the central challenge of maintaining stability when supports are conditional, resources scarce, and progress fragile.

Research on addiction recovery, for example, highlights the daily labour of resisting relapse, recalibrating expectations, and managing boredom or craving — forms of affective work that rarely leave measurable traces (Neale et al., 2014). Similarly, studies of chronic illness management describe the temporal negotiation of symptoms, treatment regimens, and waiting lists, where 'good days' and 'bad days' disrupt linear models of recovery (Charmaz, 1991). Unemployment research likewise documents the psychic and practical strains of waiting: waiting for benefits, for interviews, for a call that may never come (Jeffrey, 2010). Each of these literatures foregrounds the micro-temporalities of endurance, improvisation, and drift under constraint.

Bringing desistance into dialogue with these fields could illuminate shared mechanisms of constrained adaptation. Across domains, sequencing matters: a late-arriving intervention may have little effect if motivation has already eroded, while a scaffold that coincides with readiness can catalyse stability. Density also matters: the cumulative weight of obligations — whether treatment requirements, job-search conditions, or probation appointments — can tip fragile routines into collapse. And recognition matters: progress that is invisible to systems of evaluation often erodes self-belief, while small signs of recognition can sustain effort.

At the same time, comparative work would highlight distinctive features of penal governance. Unlike in health or welfare domains, desistance unfolds under conditions of surveillance and sanction: missteps may not only stall progress but trigger recall or reincarceration. This sharpens the stakes of misalignment and

magnifies the consequences of drift. Future research could therefore productively adopt a cross-domain perspective, situating desistance within a wider sociology of constrained change. Doing so would not only broaden theoretical understanding but also offer comparative insight into how people sustain fragile transformations under conditions where time is rationed, supports are conditional, and recognition is uneven.

7.3.4 Long-Run Consolidation

Finally, the chronopolitical framework underscores the importance of extending the temporal horizon of desistance research. Most longitudinal studies trace participants for one to two years, a span that captures the turbulence of early re-entry but rarely the longer-term consolidation or unravelling of change. Yet many of the dynamics documented in this thesis — fragile scaffolding, the exhaustion of emotional labour, the misalignment of recognition — continue to unfold well beyond the licence period. To understand whether desistance stabilises or decays, research must follow participants over five, ten, or more years.

Such long-run ethnographies would allow scholars to examine whether scaffolds — housing, sobriety, employment, prosocial ties — endure across extended time frames or erode once conditional supports lapse. They could reveal whether men eventually recalibrate institutional tempos into their own routines, or whether misalignments persist as a source of fragility. For example, some participants in this study managed to sustain stability for 12–18 months only to drift once the scaffolding of supervision expired. It remains unclear whether such drift represents a temporary plateau, a permanent vulnerability, or an ordinary stage in the longer arc of change.

Extending the horizon would also make it possible to track how recognition and evaluation misalignment evolves over time. Does the divergence between self, system, and researcher narrow once men are free from probation's stopwatch, or does it widen as institutional recognition falls away altogether? Do men eventually arrive at their own stable definitions of success, or does the absence of external validation

undermine these self-assessments? Only by following participants beyond the immediate re-entry window can these questions be addressed.

There is also a need to observe how policy reforms and welfare shifts reshape long-run trajectories. Housing markets, benefit regimes, and penal policies are not static; their reconfiguration alters the temporal scaffolding available to prison-leavers. Long-run ethnographies would provide a lens on how changing institutional calendars ripple through lived desistance, producing new alignments and misalignments across time.

In short, future research must resist the pull of short time frames that equate early stability with permanent change. By extending the horizon, scholars can capture desistance not as a momentary outcome but as an evolving process whose sustainability depends on how scaffolds, supports, and evaluations of progress endure — or collapse — across the long run.

7.3.5 Comparative Sociology of Change

A final direction for future research lies in positioning desistance studies within a broader comparative sociology of behavioural change. The chronopolitical lens developed here does not only illuminate the temporal dynamics of leaving crime; it also resonates with other domains where individuals must sustain fragile progress under conditions of structural constraint. Addiction recovery, long-term unemployment, and chronic illness management all share the feature that progress is uneven, recursive, and continually vulnerable to disruption. In each case, institutional tempos — treatment cycles, welfare conditionality, or medical check-ups — rarely align with lived rhythms of adaptation, producing instability, misrecognition, and drift.

Comparative work across these domains could therefore deepen criminology's dialogue with allied fields. In medical sociology, Charmaz (1991) and others have shown how chronic illness reorganises the

experience of time, with patients navigating long stretches of waiting punctuated by sudden crises. In studies of welfare and unemployment, Jeffrey (2010) documents how young people in India endure prolonged "waithood," their futures constrained by bureaucratic calendars that erode motivation. Haney (2006) demonstrates how unstable welfare regimes in Eastern Europe produce constant recalibration of household survival strategies. These insights parallel the experiences of prison-leavers in this study, who were compelled to reorganise their lives around licence conditions, housing contracts, and benefit cycles.

Bringing these literatures into conversation would encourage criminology to move beyond treating desistance as an exceptional process tied only to crime. Instead, desistance could be situated as one case within a wider class of micro-temporal struggles: efforts to sustain change when institutional and lived tempos misalign. Such a comparative sociology would both sharpen theoretical debates in criminology and allow desistance scholars to contribute back to broader sociologies of time, agency, and structural violence.

Moreover, examining desistance alongside recovery, unemployment, or chronic illness could generate practical insights. If similar mechanisms of fragility and endurance operate across domains, then strategies of support — whether extended scaffolding, recognition of invisible labour, or recalibration of evaluative tempos — may also be transferable. Comparative work could thus advance not only theoretical alignment but also cross-sectoral policy learning, situating criminology within a wider agenda of studying how people negotiate slow, uneven change under constraint.

7.4 Questions that Went Unanswered

This section marks the limits of the study and the claims it can support. It identifies six constraints — scope and scale, temporal horizon, data type, context, perspective, and theoretical reach — which bound inference and situate the findings as mechanism-focused and context-specific. They point to the need for comparative, longer-run and multi-actor research.

i. *Scope and Scale Limits*

This study was intentionally designed as a single-site, intensive, longitudinal ethnography, following a single cohort of men engaged with the RESTART pilot in one English region. The strength of this design lies in its ability to produce a fine-grained account of the micro-temporal, situational, and interactional dynamics of desistance – insights that are often flattened in large-scale, quantitative accounts (Small, 2009). Repeated contact over two years of fieldwork enabled the tracing of small shifts in motivation, the incremental accumulation or erosion of stability, and the contingencies that shaped participants' daily decisions. However, the very features that make this approach methodologically distinctive also delimit the scale of the claims that can be made.

The cohort was geographically bounded and demographically narrow: all participants were men, most were White British, and all were recruited via a single service provider operating within a distinct penal and policy environment. These parameters necessarily constrain the transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While qualitative generalisation allows for the identification of processes and mechanisms that may be relevant elsewhere (Payne & Williams, 2005), this study does not – and cannot – claim statistical representativeness. Its strength is in illuminating *how* desistance unfolded under particular structural and institutional conditions, rather than predicting its occurrence in other contexts.

In this sense, the design stands in productive contrast to large-scale longitudinal studies such as the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (Farrington et al., 2006) or the U.S. Pathways to Desistance project (Mulvey, 2011). These studies, with their hundreds or thousands of participants, offer breadth across demographic groups and permit robust statistical modelling of desistance trajectories. They have yielded influential findings about the timing of peak offending, the role of marriage and employment as turning points, and the persistence of early-life disadvantage. Yet, by necessity, they rely on structured interviews and survey instruments that capture behaviour at wide temporal intervals, leaving the lived texture of daily decision-making largely invisible. The present study reverses that trade-off: sacrificing sample breadth in

order to capture the in-between moments – the hesitations, the half-steps, and the reversals – that large-N designs rarely detect.

This focus comes at a cost. The absence of a more demographically diverse sample limits the capacity to speak to variations in sequencing, timing, and structural alignment across gender, ethnicity, age cohorts, or regions. For example, research on women's desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Rumgay, 2004) highlights relational dynamics and caregiving responsibilities that may reorder the sequencing of change. Similarly, studies of desistance among racialised groups in different jurisdictions (Peterson & Krivo, 2010; Pager, 2007) point to distinct structural constraints and opportunity structures that were not observable in the present dataset.

Future work could address these limitations by combining the micro-temporal ethnographic sensibility developed here with a comparative or multi-site design, allowing for the identification of both context-specific and cross-cutting mechanisms. Alternatively, embedding this kind of intensive follow-up within a larger mixed-method framework – as in Farrall et al.'s (2014) integration of qualitative life-story interviews with survey data – could preserve micro-scale insight while extending the analytic reach to questions of prevalence and variation. In short, while the scope and scale of this study were integral to its methodological depth, they also define its boundaries: the findings speak most directly to men in similar penal and policy contexts and should be extrapolated beyond these with caution.

ii. *Temporal Limits*

The temporal horizon of this study – extending from pre-release to approximately eighteen months post-release – was deliberately chosen to capture both the immediate and medium-term stages of community re-entry. This window allowed for the observation of rapid, volatile shifts in the early months after release, as well as the onset of longer-term challenges such as post-licence drift (see Chapter 5). By structuring the research longitudinally, with repeated interviews and sustained participant observation, it was possible to

document how change unfolded across different temporal registers – from the urgency of daily survival to the accumulation of structural strain or stability over months.

Yet, while this design illuminates the short- to medium-term desistance process in exceptional detail, it cannot speak directly to the durability of change over longer periods. The literature on long-run desistance suggests that critical turning points, identity transformations, and structural realignments may take years – even decades – to consolidate (Maruna, 2001; Farrall, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003). Relapse into offending, or alternatively, the embedding of pro-social roles, may occur well beyond the eighteen-month mark, often in response to life events (e.g., relationship changes, employment loss, bereavement) that were outside the observational scope of this study.

This limitation is particularly salient when considering the 'chronopolitics of responsibility' (see 6.2.3). Participants' ability to sustain change over time is partly contingent on the alignment – or misalignment – of personal readiness with structural opportunity. In some cases, as with Aakesh's delayed access to employment, this alignment failed to materialise within the study period; in others, promising starts may yet unravel in the absence of ongoing support. The eighteen-month frame captures the initial stages of this temporal interplay but cannot reveal whether early successes are retained, eroded, or transformed in the long term.

Comparative work underscores this gap. Megan Comfort's (2008) ethnography of women partnered with incarcerated men, and Anderson's (1999) long-term fieldwork in Philadelphia, reveal how social worlds and behavioural patterns evolve over decades, often in non-linear ways that defy short-term interpretation. Similarly, Farrall's (2002) longitudinal interviews with probationers, conducted over multiple years, highlight that desistance trajectories often involve multiple cycles of progress and regression before stabilising. Without equivalent temporal reach, the present study cannot adjudicate whether the patterns observed here represent early consolidation, temporary reprieve, or the beginnings of relapse.

A related constraint is the inability to assess late-stage desistance vulnerabilities – for example, the risk of re-offending after supervision has ended and formal support has withdrawn, a moment that Chapter 5 suggested may be particularly precarious. The study design captured the transition out of licence but did not extend far enough to observe whether participants established new forms of self-structuring in the years following, or whether existential drift became a pathway back into offending.

Addressing these temporal limits would require either an extended ethnographic engagement over 5 to 10 years, or the integration of follow-up data from official reconviction records and subsequent interviews. Such approaches, while resource-intensive, would allow for the examination of long-term stability, the late emergence of structural opportunities, and the evolution of identity over the life course. In the absence of these data, this study's account of time in desistance must remain partial: rich in short- and medium-term dynamics, but necessarily silent on the later arcs of change.

iii. *Data-Type Limits*

The dataset underpinning this thesis is composed primarily of ethnographic fieldnotes and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants, supplemented by observation of RESTART team meetings and informal conversations with practitioners. This qualitative approach foregrounds participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations, allowing for the close analysis of meaning-making, identity negotiation, and the micro-temporal interplay of internal and structural factors. However, the exclusive reliance on self-reported accounts – without much systematic triangulation with other data sources – presents important limitations.

Self-report data are inherently shaped by selective recall, impression management, and the dynamics of the researcher–participant relationship (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). In the present study, these factors were particularly relevant given the sensitivity of discussing offending behaviour, breaches of licence, or ongoing criminal involvement. While sustained rapport often encouraged disclosure – as in instances where participants revealed re-offending months after it occurred – there remains the possibility that certain

activities, attitudes, or experiences were withheld or reframed. This is not a flaw unique to this study; indeed, the subjectivity and partiality of self-report is intrinsic to all qualitative research and can itself be analytically revealing (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). Yet it does mean that the behavioural record presented here cannot claim completeness in an empirical sense.

The absence of official criminal justice data – such as Police National Computer (PNC) reconviction records or probation case files – further limits the capacity to cross-verify reported events or to situate participants' trajectories within broader statistical patterns. Large-scale longitudinal studies, such as the 'Pathways to Desistance' project (Mulvey et al., 2010; Mulvey, 2011) or Farrall's (2002) work with probationers, have integrated official reconviction data with qualitative accounts, enabling researchers to examine divergences between narrative self-presentation and recorded behaviour. Such triangulation can reveal whether certain "desistance narratives" correspond to sustained behavioural change or mask ongoing offending. In the present study, the methodological choice to rely solely on participants' accounts means that the analysis privileges narrative truth over official record truth, with the understanding that both are constructed and partial in different ways.

Additionally, the focus on men directly engaged with RESTART meant that institutional and practitioner perspectives were captured only peripherally. While fieldnotes from RESTART team meetings provided valuable insight into the organisational context, the study did not include systematic interviews with probation officers, housing providers, or employers. As a result, the account of structural mechanisms rests largely on how participants experienced and interpreted them, as well as how the researcher observed them, rather than on multi-actor perspectives. Studies adopting a fuller multi-level ethnographic approach – such as Harding et al.'s (2013) 'neighbourhoods and re-entry' research – have shown how combining perspectives can illuminate tensions, misunderstandings, and mismatches between institutional intentions and client experiences.

Future research could address these data-type limits by integrating official records with ethnographic material, incorporating practitioner and policy-maker interviews, or adopting a collaborative ethnography

model in which multiple stakeholder perspectives are systematically collected and analysed. Doing so would not only enhance empirical completeness but also offer comparative insights into how different actors perceive and enact the temporal and structural dimensions of desistance. In privileging participants' own accounts, this study necessarily trades empirical triangulation for narrative and experiential depth – a trade-off that aligns with its theoretical commitments but marks an important boundary to its evidentiary claims.

iv. *Context Limits*

This study is grounded in the specific penal, socio-economic, and policy context of England between 2022 and 2024 – a period marked by pandemic recovery, inflationary pressures, and ongoing turbulence in the probation and prison estate (see 0.1.2 Setting the Scene). The RESTART pilot was itself a time- and place-bound intervention, operating under the distinct statutory framework of England and Wales' probation service and shaped by the volatile housing and labour markets of the Thames Valley region. As such, the findings are deeply embedded in this spatio-temporal context, and their transferability to other jurisdictions or time periods must be considered carefully. The cohort was also specific: a relatively small group of adult men leaving custody through the RESTART pilot in the Thames Valley, often facing acute housing, health, and income insecurity, which further limits the extent to which these findings can be generalised to other populations (for example, women, those serving longer sentences, or people released into markedly different socio-economic contexts).

The penal system in England and Wales is characterised by a comparatively high rate of recall to custody, short licence periods for many determinate sentences, and a fragmented support landscape following the partial renationalisation of probation in 2021 (MoJ, 2025). These structural features shape the sequencing and availability of opportunities for change in ways that may differ sharply from other systems. For example, the parole-supervised releases common in the United States often involve longer supervision periods and different incentive structures (Petersilia, 2003), while Nordic jurisdictions operate under penal philosophies that prioritise normalisation and continuity of care (Pratt & Eriksson, 2014). Consequently,

the tensions between ‘supervision as scaffolding’ and ‘supervision as surveillance’ documented here may play out differently where supervision is less risk-oriented or where social welfare provision is more generous.

Economic and housing market conditions are also critical to situating these findings. Participants’ struggles to secure and maintain housing (Chapter 3 and 4, primarily) occurred within a regional environment of high rents, limited social housing stock, and strict eligibility criteria. In contexts with stronger social housing provision – as in parts of continental Europe – the destabilising housing precarity seen here might be less pronounced, altering both the immediate post-release experience and the longer-term prospects for desistance. Similarly, the scarcity of secure, decently paid employment in the study region shaped the centrality of work as both an aspiration and a frustration (see Chapter 2 and 5, primarily). In areas with tighter labour markets or more robust active labour market policies, the relationship between employment and desistance may follow a different trajectory.

From a methodological standpoint, the ethnographic approach privileges depth over breadth, meaning the sample is not statistically representative and cannot be used to make probabilistic claims about other settings. In qualitative research, the analogue to external validity is often conceptualised as *transferability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) – the degree to which readers, drawing on thick description, can judge the applicability of findings to other contexts. While the narratives and mechanisms analysed here may resonate in settings with comparable penal logics and socio-economic constraints, their expression will inevitably be mediated by local policy, cultural norms, and institutional practices.

Comparative desistance research suggests both the promise and the caution required in this regard. Studies conducted in Scotland (McNeill, 2016), the Netherlands (Wermink et al., 2010), and the US (Giordano et al., 2002) show that certain underlying dynamics – such as the importance of social bonds and the destabilising effects of structural disadvantage – are recurrent across contexts. Yet the specific configurations of opportunity, supervision, and stigma vary, producing different temporal patterns and vulnerabilities.

The account developed here should therefore be read not as a universal model of desistance, but as a contextually situated analysis of how internal and structural mechanisms interacted under the penal, economic, and social conditions of a particular time and place. Future research adopting either a comparative or cross-national design could test the extent to which the mechanisms identified here hold across contexts with differing penal philosophies, welfare regimes, and economic structures, thereby refining both their explanatory scope and their practical implications.

v. *Perspective Limits*

While this study prioritises the voices of men leaving prison – in keeping with its aim to understand desistance as lived and practised on a micro scale – this focus inevitably narrows the analytic lens. The dataset captures participants' own accounts, supplemented by limited practitioner observations, but does not systematically include the perspectives of other actors who play significant roles in the resettlement process. These missing voices shape both the substance and interpretation of the findings.

First, the absence of family and intimate partner perspectives means the study cannot fully explore the relational dimensions of resettlement beyond what participants disclose. Relationships often serve as critical supports or stressors during the desistance process (Weaver, 2015; Murray, Farrington & Sekol, 2012; Mills & Codd, 2008), and they are central to many theoretical accounts of change, from Sampson and Laub's (1993) turning points model to Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation theory. While some participants spoke about partners, children, or parents, these accounts are necessarily partial, filtered through their own interpretive frames, and shaped by the dynamics of disclosure. The resulting analysis can illuminate how men perceive and narrate relational influences, but it cannot verify, contextualise, or contrast these accounts with the perspectives of those on the other side of the relationship.

Second, the limited integration of employer, landlord, probation officer, and service provider perspectives restricts the capacity to analyse how structural mechanisms are enacted in practice. For example, the thesis

documents how participants experienced housing allocation systems as slow, opaque, and punitive (Chapter 4), but it does not directly examine the decision-making processes or constraints faced by housing officers. Likewise, while Aakesh's employment search illustrates the psychological toll of repeated rejection (Chapter 5), the study does not include data from employers about their hiring criteria, perceptions of criminal records, or experiences of working with ex-prisoners. Research adopting a multi-perspective design – such as Werth's (2012) ethnography of parole from both officer and client viewpoints, or Harding et al.'s (2013) neighbourhood re-entry study – has shown that juxtaposing accounts from different actors can reveal misalignments between policy intention and lived experience, better identifying points of friction for potential reform.

Future research could build on these findings by adopting a multi-actor ethnographic approach, incorporating family members, practitioners, and community stakeholders alongside participants. Such designs would not only triangulate accounts but also enable a richer analysis of how desistance is co-produced – or undermined – across different social domains.

vi. *Theoretical Blind Spots*

Despite its sustained engagement with desistance and resettlement scholarship and its effort to challenge dominant frameworks, this thesis leaves certain theoretical avenues only partially explored. Some of these limitations arise from the scope and design of the study, while others reflect the inherent tension between developing new conceptual insights and engaging deeply with the lived realities of their cohort.

First, while the analysis applies a framework of temporality to the study of desistance, it does not attempt to develop a formal typology of sequencing or mechanism interaction. Existing work – such as Farrall and Calverley's (2006) categorisation of 'event ordering' or Sampson and Laub's (2003) elaboration of turning points – has sought to identify generalisable patterns across large samples and long timelines. The context-specific dataset here is ill-suited to producing a stable typology, and the fluid, contradictory trajectories

documented in Chapters 2–6 further resist neat categorisation. While the findings offer conceptual provocations – for example, the destabilising effects of misaligned temporalities between readiness and opportunity – these remain at the level of mechanism and narrative, rather than being codified into a formal, transferable model.

Second, although the study engages with theories of structural disadvantage, carceral reproduction, and cognitive transformation, it does not fully integrate insights from adjacent bodies of theory that could enrich the analysis. For example, life course criminology offers robust tools for examining how the timing and duration of institutional contact shape long-term outcomes (Elder, 1998), while theories of social reproduction and critical political economy could deepen the account of how macroeconomic shifts filter into micro-level opportunities. Similarly, scholarship on affect and embodiment (e.g., Fleetwood, 2014) could provide a richer vocabulary for the felt experience of existential drift documented in Chapter 5.

Third, the analysis is largely oriented towards the post-release period, which means it does not fully theorise the role of pre-prison life histories in shaping post-prison desistance possibilities. While Chapter 3 briefly situates participants' prison lives in relation to pre-existing debts, networks, and reputations, the study does not develop a sustained theoretical account of how pre-carceral trajectories condition the interplay between agency and structure after release. Other longitudinal research – such as the 'Pathways to Desistance' study (Mulvey et al., 2010) – has demonstrated the value of integrating pre-offending histories to contextualise post-release change.

Finally, the study's theoretical contribution is bounded by its empirical focus on men in a single penal system. While it raises questions about the universality of canonical desistance theories – particularly those that privilege linear progress, intentionality, and discrete turning points – it does not fully rework these frameworks into a comprehensive alternative. Instead, its contribution lies in offering a micro-temporal, contextually situated critique, which could serve as a foundation for future comparative and theory-building work. This is both a limitation and a deliberate positioning: the goal has been to trouble and complicate, rather than to resolve, the theoretical terrain.

Future research could address these blind spots by combining ethnographic depth with broader comparative or longitudinal designs, by explicitly integrating underused theoretical lenses, and by seeking to translate micro-temporal insights into models that can be tested across diverse contexts.

7.5 Final: Implications & Provocations

This final section translates the chronopolitics of misaligned desistance into practical implications and field-level provocations. Drawing together the four themes — time and fragility, scaffolding vs surveillance, the slow work of change, and misaligned evaluations — it sets out three lines of consequence. First (7.5.1), for probation and allied agencies: design and pacing matter as much as provision, calling for scaffolds that are durable, flexible and temporally aligned to lived rhythms. Second (7.5.2), for evaluation: what counts — and for whom — is not neutral; metrics operate as interventions that can stabilise or unsettle progress, demanding more temporally sensitive and recognition-aware approaches. Third (7.5.3), a provocation to the field: if prevailing measures primarily secure institutional legitimacy rather than lived stability, criminology may need to rethink the centrality of measurement itself. The aim is not to prescribe a single model, but to specify where changes in rhythm and recognition can reduce fragility and expand room for agency.

7.5.1 Probation & Policy Implications

The first implication lies in how probation and related agencies design and deliver support. This study shows that men's trajectories are most fragile where institutional tempos are compressed and conditional. Probation calendars, housing contracts, and welfare deadlines impose rhythms that rarely align with the slower, uneven pace of lived change. The result is not simply inefficiency but heightened risk: breaches that

might have been avoided with more flexible timelines, evictions that undo fragile stability, or recalls triggered less by dangerous behaviour than by administrative misfit.

Policy interventions should therefore be evaluated not only on what they provide but on *when* and *for how long*. Short-term scaffolds may generate momentary alignment, but they also embed fragility if they expire before stability consolidates. The evidence presented in Chapters 3 and 4 — from men 'set up to fail' on the first day of release to those losing housing because tenancies lapsed too soon — demonstrates that conditionality produces both support and surveillance simultaneously. Recognising this temporal dimension suggests a shift in emphasis: from designing ever more targeted interventions to creating scaffolds that are durable, flexible, and paced to men's lived rhythms.

For probation practice, the implication is that case management should be rethought as a process of temporal alignment rather than box-ticking. Instead of compressing progress into three-, six-, or twelve-month cycles, practitioners might ask: what rhythms structure this person's everyday survival? How can institutional timelines adapt to those rhythms, rather than the reverse? Such an approach would not eliminate misalignment but could mitigate its most destabilising effects, reducing the churn of breach, recall, and crisis-driven re-entry into services.

7.5.2 Evaluative Implications

A second implication concerns how desistance is defined and evaluated. Across the study, it was evident that evaluative standards diverged sharply between probation, researchers, and the men themselves. For probation, progress was assessed through compliance within compressed cycles: attending appointments, avoiding breaches, sustaining housing or employment for fixed durations. For researchers, desistance could be recognised in slower, more fragile footholds: a man resisting relapse, keeping volatile relationships intact, or choosing disengagement from negative peers. For the men, however, success was often defined

in still more intimate and uneven ways — measured by endurance, by the avoidance of collapse, or by simply 'keeping going.'

This divergence creates a persistent problem of evaluative misalignment. A man may satisfy probation's requirements and be formally recorded as progressing yet privately feel that he is only 'treading water' or even regressing. Conversely, men who saw themselves as improving often accumulated breaches that marked them as failing in institutional terms. These incongruences were not trivial. They shaped motivation, influenced whether men disclosed struggles, and determined access to scarce resources. They also generated what might be termed compliance without conviction: strategic adherence to institutional benchmarks without any deeper sense of stability or self-recognition.

The risks of evaluative misalignment extend beyond individual cases. They speak to the legitimacy of current measurement practices. If "success" is defined in ways that men themselves experience as irrelevant or unattainable, then supervision risks reinforcing marginalisation rather than alleviating it. Moreover, as Chapters 5 and 6 illustrated, evaluative frameworks are not neutral. They actively shape the resettlement and desistance process: influencing self-narratives, redistributing resources, and structuring how men come to judge their own worth. In some cases, participants described themselves as 'failing' not because their lives were deteriorating, but because internalised metrics suggested they were not desisting in the 'correct' way.

The implication is that evaluation must be understood not merely as retrospective measurement but as an intervention in its own right. Definitions of success can stabilise progress when they resonate with lived experience, or destabilise it when they impose alien tempos and benchmarks. For probation practice, this raises a difficult question: should evaluation seek to capture compliance, or should it aim for alignment between institutional metrics and lived meaning? For criminological research, it underscores the need to interrogate how our own categories and measures may inadvertently reproduce the very sense of failure we set out to explain.

7.5.3 Final Provocation

One of the most persistent questions to emerge from this study is deceptively simple: what counts as successful desistance — and to whom? Over 18 months of fieldwork, it became clear that definitions of success did not simply diverge between participants and institutions; they shifted over time, were contested in practice, and at times actively undermined stability. A tenancy deemed 'secure' in probation's records could feel precarious to the man living under threat of eviction; a period of abstinence could appear as fragile suspension rather than progress; a compliance milestone could be experienced as hollow if it carried no resonance with lived meaning.

From a chronopolitical perspective, these tensions are not accidental but structural. Success was continually refracted through misaligned temporalities: the compressed cycles of licence periods, the cliff-edges of housing contracts, the slower, grinding pace of emotional labour, and the recursive temporality of lived change. The divergence of these clocks meant that recognition was rarely synchronised. Men, institutions, and researchers often counted success according to different rhythms — and these misalignments did not just distort measurement, they actively shaped outcomes. In this sense, the chronopolitics of desistance exposes not only how success is defined, but how those definitions are paced, sequenced, and imposed.

The final provocation is whether criminology might begin to imagine a world where we stop measuring desistance in the ways we do now — not because measuring change is irrelevant, but because measurement, as currently designed, secures institutional legitimacy more than it serves the people whose lives it purports to track. By tracing how these definitions were internalised, contested, and re-negotiated across the 18-month ethnography, this thesis shows that the act of measuring is not neutral. It shapes the field of action, redistributes resources, and powerfully influences the way people feel about their own progress – and, by extension, their own worth.

This critique is sharpened by the fact that, in light of the analysis developed across the thesis, it is not obvious that 'desistance' is what has been observed at all. What the ethnography most clearly documents are the temporal politics of release and resettlement: men trying to secure housing, income, treatment and recognition under conditions of chronic instability, and trying to avoid further justice system involvement in the process. Desistance was the language that framed the project and organised the research design, but in many of the encounters described here it is a label applied from the outside, rather than a horizon that men themselves named or pursued. For most participants, the immediate goal was not to 'desist' in an abstract sense but to get through the week, keep a bed, avoid a recall, or contain addiction long enough to reach the next appointment.

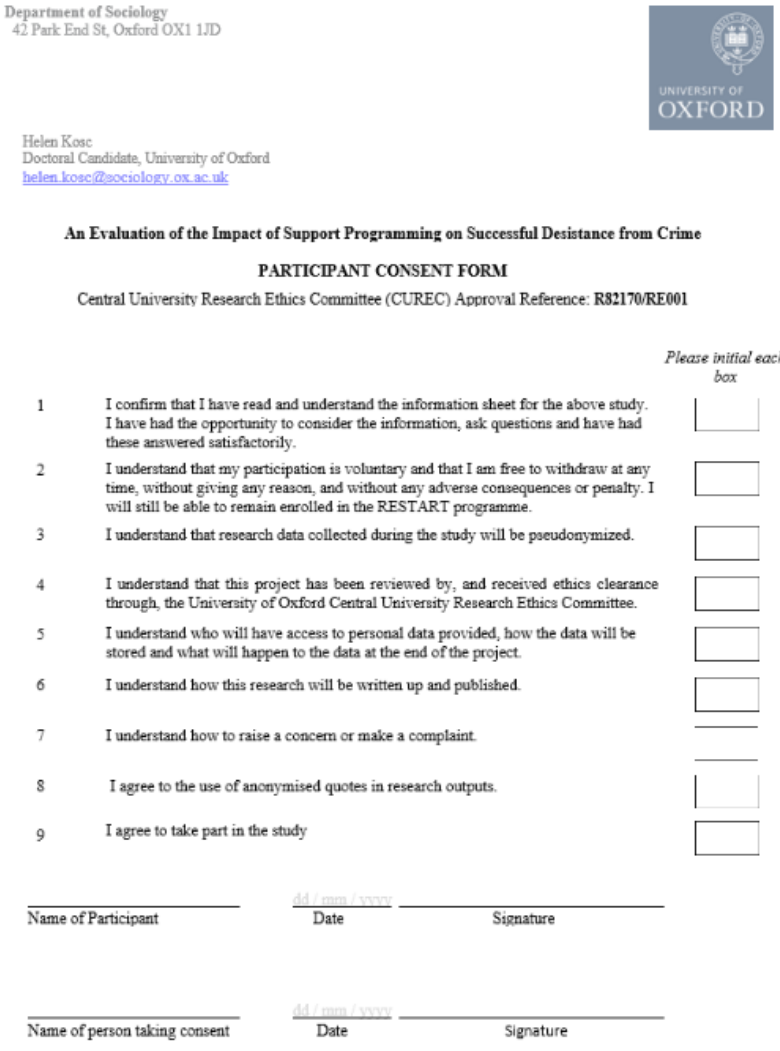
Seen from this angle, calling the thesis a study of desistance risks reproducing the very misalignment it sets out to critique. It translates practices of survival, improvisation and partial stability into an evaluative language that was never the men's own and turns their efforts into evidence for or against an outcome category they did not choose. Rather than refining ever more sensitive indicators of who *has* or *has not* desisted successfully, it may be more productive to decentre desistance as the primary unit of evaluation and focus instead on the mundane, time-bound practices of survival and the structural conditions that make sustained change imaginable or impossible.

The challenge, then, is not simply to refine our metrics but to re-think the relationship between measurement, meaning, and justice itself. If 'success' is continually fractured across evaluative standpoints, then perhaps the most urgent task for criminology is not to develop better instruments of measurement, but to reconsider whether the measurement of post-prison lives should remain the dominant paradigm at all.

Appendices

Appendix A. Consent Materials and Ethics Approvals

This appendix includes the participant information sheet, consent materials (including the verbal-consent script where written consent was not feasible), and the institutional ethics approval confirmation (reference numbers retained; personal identifiers redacted).



Department of Sociology
42 Park End St, Oxford OX1 1JD

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Helen Kosc
Doctoral Candidate, University of Oxford
helen.kosc@sociology.ox.ac.uk

An Evaluation of the Impact of Support Programming on Successful Desistance from Crime

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference: **R82170/RE001**

		Please initial each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty. I will still be able to remain enrolled in the RESTART programme.	
3	I understand that research data collected during the study will be pseudonymized.	
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
6	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	
8	I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in research outputs.	
9	I agree to take part in the study	

Name of Participant _____ Date dd / mm / yyyy _____ Signature

Name of person taking consent _____ Date dd / mm / yyyy _____ Signature

Figure A.1. Participant Consent Form

Department of Sociology
42 Park End St, Oxford OX1 1JD

Helen Kosc
Doctoral Candidate, University of Oxford
helen.kosc@sociology.ox.ac.uk

An Evaluation of the Impact of Support Programming on Successful Desistance from Crime
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference: R82170/RE001

1. ***Why is this research being conducted?***

'RESTART Thames Valley' is collaborating with University of Oxford researcher, Helen Kosc, to study the challenges that exist for prison leavers during resettlement. Helen hopes to shadow you on your resettlement journey, from the time of enrolment with RESTART to May 2024, meeting with you every 2-4 weeks to discuss your resettlement journey, experiences during release, and any challenges you faced or support you received during resettlement. If you consent, Helen will tag along to meetings with yourself and your RESTART worker, shadowing these sessions and the kind of support you are receiving. Helen can come to as many or as few as these sessions as you feel comfortable with.

2. ***Why have I been invited to take part?***

I am interested in speaking to all prison leavers enrolled in and receiving support from 'RESTART Thames Valley'.

3. ***Do I have to take part?***

No. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether or not to take part. If you do agree to take part, you may withdraw yourself from the study, at any time and without giving a reason, by advising me of this decision. You will still be able to continue receiving support from RESTART after withdrawing from the research element.

4. ***What will happen to me if I take part in the research?***

Upon giving your consent to participate in the research, Helen will accompany you and your RESTART worker on some of your future support sessions, shadowing and taking notes at these meetings. Helen will also conduct semi-structured interviews with you, after these sessions, every 2-4 weeks from the moment of enrolment, to see hear from you directly about how your resettlement journey is developing.
All information taken by Helen will be hand-written – no audio recordings – and all will be recorded under pseudonymized participant numbers, such that no information shared will be explicitly linked to you. Notes taken during your conversation will then be stored securely until they are analysed alongside the data collected from all other participants.

5. ***Are there any potential risks in taking part?***

You may feel uncomfortable sharing personal details for privacy/security reasons. However, it should be noted that your names and personal details will be anonymised, so that we do not risk breaching confidentiality. Helen will also refrain from recording any personal details about criminal record that may identify an individual.

Figure A.2. Participant Information Sheet, page 1/2

6. ***Are there any benefits in taking part?***

By collaborating in this research you will help illuminate the ways that organizations can act as points of intervention for the recently released, formerly incarcerated and shed light on the difficulties those released during this time are facing. With your help, this research may have policy implications and encourage more government funding and support for these critical services and organizations.

7. ***Will the research be published?***

The research will be published. Incredible precaution will be taken to ensure you will not be linked to the published data in any way.

8. ***Who has reviewed this study?***

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

9. ***Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study?***

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Helen Kosc at helen.kosc@sociology.ox.ac.uk. I will acknowledge your query or concern within 3 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee;
Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk;
Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

10. ***Data Protection/***

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study.
The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest.
Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/gdpr/individualrights/.

11. ***Further Information and Contact Details***

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Helen Kosc
Department of Sociology

Figure A.3. Participant Information Sheet, page 2/2 [identifiers redacted]

Ministry of Justice

HM Prison & Probation Service

Helen Kosc
The University of Oxford
Wolfson College
Linton Road
Oxford, OX2 6UD

National Research Committee
Email: National.Research@Justice.gov.uk

APPROVED SUBJECT TO MODIFICATIONS

Ref: 2023-172
Title: An Evaluation of the Impact of Support Programming on Successful Desistance from Crime

Dear Helen,

Further to your application to undertake research across HMPPS, the National Research Committee (NRC) is pleased to grant approval in principle for your research. The Committee has requested the following modifications:

- NRC approval does not extend to including information gathered from informal conversations with HMPPS staff. If you wish to include HMPPS staff in the research project, please submit an amendment request to the National Research Committee providing further information on the methodology, as well as providing information and consent sheets.
- Given the nature of the data being collected as part of this study, the Committee requests that the title of the project be amended to remove reference to this being an evaluation of impact.
- Given the large volume of interviews planned (100 prison leavers) please consider how saturation of key points will be monitored and the resource required to follow up such a large cohort. It is recommended that recruitment ceases once saturation of key points has been reached.
- In order to ensure there is no undue stress or concern amongst those under supervision, further consideration should also be given to the use of less emotive language in the interview schedules.
- When taking notes please ensure all necessary security arrangements are in place (i.e., transportation, storage and disposal) in the line with GDPR and University guidance.
- Due to the nature of the data collection through notes, the Committee recommends further consideration is given to the use of recording devices to allow easier recall of information gathered from research participants.
- If recording devices are used, the recordings should be treated as potentially disclosive and it is recommended that devices with encryption technology are used. Recordings should be wiped once they have been transcribed and anonymised unless there are clear grounds for keeping them any longer.
- Under the Prison Act (as amended by the Offender Management Act 2007), mobile phones, cameras and sound recording devices are classified as list B items, requiring authorisation from Governing

Figure A.4. National Research Committee Approval, page 1/3

Ministry of Justice

HM Prison & Probation Service

Governors / Directors of Contracted Prisons (or nominated persons) to take them into and use them in prison.

- The following should be included in all participation information sheets/consent forms:
  - Participants should be asked for their consent to the use of audio-recording equipment (if applicable).
  - Participants should be informed that there will be neither advantage nor disadvantage as a result of their decision to participate or not participate in the research.
  - It must be made clear to research participants that they can refuse to answer individual questions or withdraw from the research until a designated point, and that this will not compromise them in any way.
  - Participants should consent to any follow-up contact and the method of this contact.
  - Participants should be informed how their data will be used and for how long it will be held.
- The following should also be included in the participation information sheets/consent forms for prisoners and those under probation supervision:
  - Access to any HMPPS records for the participants should be explicitly covered (if relevant).
  - It needs to be clear that the following information has to be disclosed: behaviour that is against prison rules and can be adjudicated against, illegal acts, and behaviour that is potentially harmful to the research participant (e.g. intention to self-harm or complete suicide) or others.
  - Potential avenues of support should be specified for those who are caused any distress or anxiety.
  - The respondent should be asked to direct any requests for information, complaints and queries through their prison establishment/community provider. Direct contact details should not be provided.
- For interviews with individuals under probation supervision, it should be ensured that the relevant community provider is aware of the follow-up contact, with the location of follow-up meetings being agreed.
- The interview schedules should be tested/piloted in the first instance to check ease of use, coverage of key issues and overall length (monitoring any respondent fatigue).
- The availability and appropriateness of key training remains at the discretion of individual establishments.
- Research data should be kept no longer than necessary, e.g., when the research is to be published and the scientific journal requires the original data to be kept for a specified period.
- In the final research reports, the limitations should be clearly set out (e.g., this is not an analysis of impact of the prison leavers programme, perceptions of desistance and experiences, and no causality can be established).
- Please keep REDACTED Prison Leavers Project lead in Data and Analysis, in the Ministry of Justice, informed about the progress of your project.

Before the research can commence you must agree formally by email to the NRC (National.Research@Justice.gov.uk), confirming that you accept the modifications set out above and will comply with the terms and conditions outlined below.

Following NRC approval, the decision to grant access to prison establishments or Probation Service regions (and the offenders and practitioners within these establishments/regions) ultimately lies with the Governing Governor/Director of the establishment or the Probation Service Regional Probation Director of the region concerned.

Figure A.5. National Research Committee Approval, page 2/3 [identifiers redacted]

Ministry of Justice

HM Prison & Probation Service

NRC approval covers the following prisons / probation regions:

- HMP Bullingdon
- NPS South Central Division

If establishments/regions are to be approached as part of the research, a copy of this letter must be attached to the request to prove that the NRC has approved the study in principle. The decision to grant access to existing data lies with the Information Asset Owners (IAOs) for each data source and the researchers should abide by the data sharing conditions stipulated by each IAO.

Please note that a MoJ/HMPPS policy lead may wish to contact you to discuss the findings of your research. If requested, your contact details will be passed on and the policy lead will contact you directly.

Please quote your NRC reference number in all future correspondence.

Yours sincerely,

REDACTED

National Research Committee

Figure A.6. National Research Committee Approval, page 3/3 [identifiers redacted]

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance Team, Research Services, University of Oxford,
Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB, UK
Tel: +44(0)1865 289881 Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk

Helen Kosc
Department of Sociology
University of Oxford

6 September 2022

Dear Helen,

Research ethics approval

Research title: "Serving a Life Sentence: The Re-integration of Released, Formerly Incarcerated Offenders in Post-Pandemic Times"

Research ethics reference: R82170/RE001

The above application has been considered by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (SSH IDREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the IDREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's website.

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

Adverse events: The SSH IDRECs must be notified within seven days of any unexpected adverse consequences to the research participants, researchers or other people involved in this research project.

Audit: The SSH IDREC audits a sample of projects each year to enable the Committee to monitor the ethical aspects of research in progress.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

REDACTED

Research Ethics Manager (SSH IDREC)

Figure A.7. Social Science & Humanities Research Ethics Committee Approval [identifiers redacted]

Appendix B. Data Analysis Tools

This appendix documents the analysis scaffolding used in the study. It provides additional examples, beyond those included in 1.3.1 – 1.3.4. This section contains: an example alignment-matrix offering an illustrative snapshot; an example of coding in MAXQDA to supplant Figure 2 (1.3.1); and a concise, colour-coded codebook.

Perspective & time	Russell	Colin	Pat
System — Month 18	2 months of license remaining. Arrested and discharged for **assault**. Drifting engagement + assault read as **risk**. **Not recalled for reoffending or breach.**	**RECALLED**; Breach of license condition. Risk elevated.	Compliance with license conditions. **License satisfied** to completion. Housing + sobriety read as **stability**. **Low risk**.
Participant — Month 18	Feels like it "**doesn't count**"; setbacks eclipse small wins. Assault situation scared him. "Waiting out" license in precarity and fear.	Regards his progress as **"desisting from inside"**. Successfully **avoided relapse**. Intent to desist is still strong. Doesn't feel like has failed.	Feels **little responsibility** for progress. It happened "suddenly". **Recognizes his own progress** but doesn't feel ownership over it.
Researcher — Month 18	**MISALIGNMENT**: Some **scaffolds** remain, whilst others have thinned. Presence of negative peers **threatening stability**. Effort persists but feels **misrecognised**.	**MISALIGNMENT**: Participant is notably **misaligned** from system -- evaluations of progress and 'success' are **inconsistent**. Effort persists but is **misrecognised** / misunderstood.	**ALIGNMENT**: Effort persists, in small, subtle ways. What feels passive to Pat, is indeed agentic and effective. Found **stability** in routine + responsibility.

Table B.1. Comparative alignment at Month 18 — Russell, Colin, Pat.
Note. Labels mirror the matrices in 1.3.3; written out here for readability; see vignettes for narrative detail.

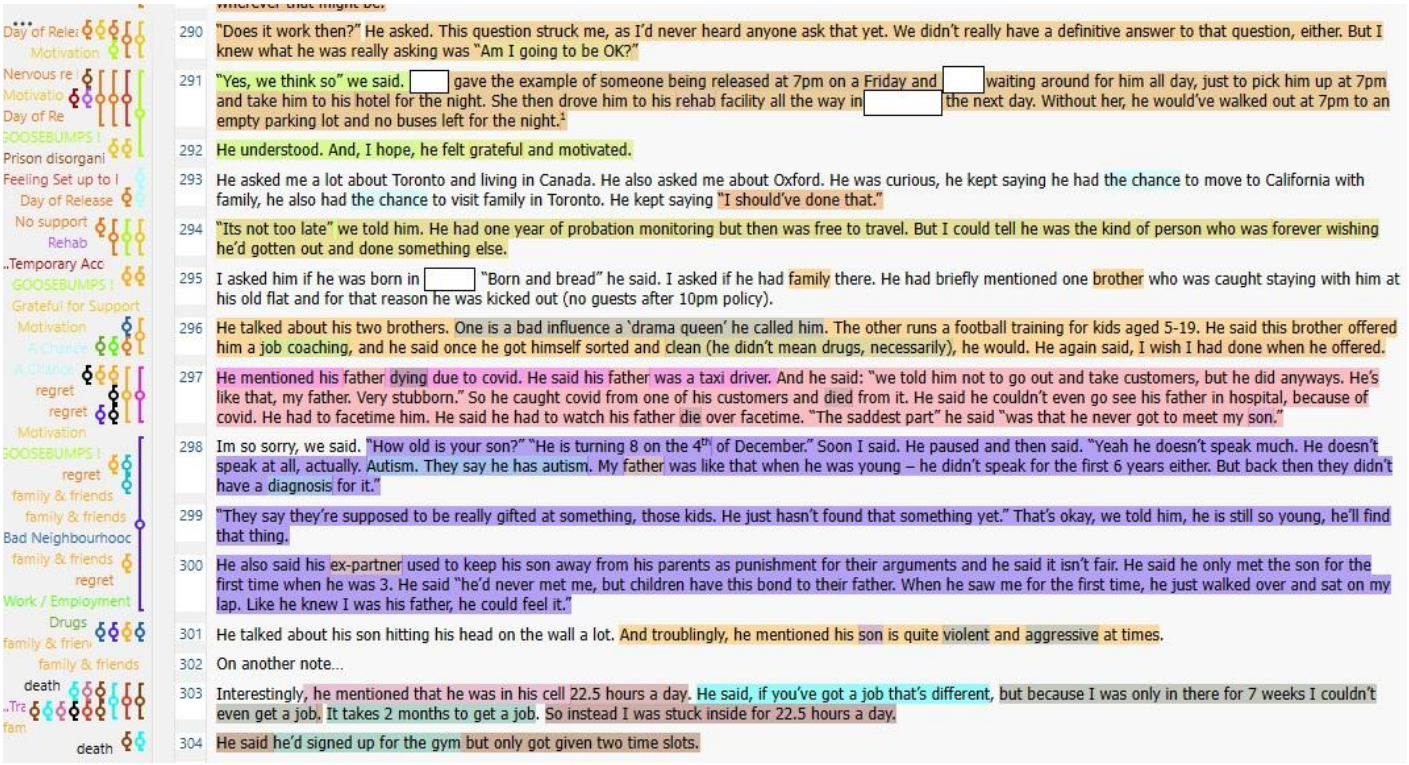


Figure B.1. Example of coded excerpt, screenshot from MAXQDA, [identifiers redacted]

Color	Code	Cod. seg. (all documents)
	Day of Release	47
	Delusional / False Perceptions of Reality	8
	Helen's Thoughts / Personal Reflections	24
	Nervous re Release	22
	food	1
	CBT / non medical treatment / therapy	3
	Give Up / NO Motivation	31
	GP / Doctor	4
	no money	13
	keeping busy / avoiding boredom	3
	duty to refer	7
	job centre	4
	county lines	1
	Discrimination	3
	foster care / care home	3
	sad	6
	Homeless / Sleeping Rough	40
	cry for help	2
	MIA / Gone missing / Lost Touch	7
	Yellow	1
	funny story	16
	far distance / long drive / long journey on day of release	8
	Perfect Re-entry	3
	Restart Worker Reflections	11
	desistence	8
	upset / frustrated / angry	14
	Approved Premises / AP	28
	Disabled / Disability / Crippled	6
	intelligent	3
	REDACTED	3
	Motivation	65
	want to be in prison / turning self in	3
	Remand	10
	Re-Traumatization / Re telling Story	3
	barriers	12

Figure B.2. Codebook, page ¼

cscs course / training course	2
threats made	4
intent	10
Past releases / Former Releases	11
reoffend / commit another crime	1
Bank	5
A Chance	16
GOOSEBUMPS !	17
Rehab	12
Happy	21
violent	26
Grateful for Support	16
lived experience	1
alone	13
Dark Gray	4
overdose	2
Benefits / Universal Credit	28
death	11
high priority	14
Recall / Recalled	37
afraid	7
Plan	22
me on the wings	20
physical description of men	19
referrals	3
sober / clean	2
self harm	7
Injured / Hospital	1
ID / birth certificate / identification	3
Age	12
External Services (Drug , Housing, Mental Health)	31
Punnett Square Feedback	5
organized	3
Bad Neighbourhood & Network	36
Mental Health	62

Figure B.3. Codebook, page 2/4

personal story / disclosing	8
Drugs	41
Temporary Accommodation	48
resettlement	1
Paraphrases	11
Probation Officer	17
distrust	1
stealing / theft	6
capable !	16
prescription / script	7
Fresh Start	25
remand	1
no responsibility	1
regret	4
medication	8
Job / Work in Prison	12
segregation	10
little wins / small successes	2
No support	24
has money / wealthy	5
Word/PDF Text Highlight	0
Trauma	22
Work / Employment / Job	45
ungrateful / rude	3
incident	14
hopeful	19
Kids / Children	17
anxious	12
researcher / positionality	4
alcohol	7
license conditions / conditions of bail	4
Training Classes in Prison	6
IOM / MAPPA	5
Police	6
school / college	1

Figure B.4. Codebook, page ¾

Figure B.5. Codebook, page 4/4

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