

**Rewriting the Narrative: Unlocking the Secrets to Lasting Change for Aotearoa's
Formerly Incarcerated**

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Attestation of Authorship

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Abstract

Desistance research has expanded considerably, yet much of it rests on Western, male-dominated samples and examines contributors to change; employment, housing, faith, physical activity and mental health, as discrete domains. Comparatively little work has been undertaken in Aotearoa, where the disproportionate imprisonment of Māori and the ongoing effects of colonisation shape both offending and the pathways away from it.

This study asked what formerly incarcerated people in Aotearoa themselves identify as the most important contributors to their desistance. Guided by an interpretivist, social constructivist orientation and informed by Kaupapa Māori principles with the guidance of a Māori expert advisor, unstructured life-story interviews were conducted with five participants of Māori, Pasifika, and Pākehā backgrounds who had been crime-free for at least four years. Accounts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Five themes were developed: Accountability in Context, The Carceral Paradox, The Relational Foundation, Becoming Someone New, and Meaningful Work. Participants accepted responsibility for their offending while recognising the conditions that shaped it, treating agency and circumstances as complementary rather than competing. Critically, the recognised domains rarely operated independently. Their significance lay in the relationships, recognition, dignity, and opportunity they enabled, with trusted relationships emerging not as one supportive factor among many but as the mechanism through which identity change was recognised and sustained. Participants also described a criminal justice system that produced many of the barriers they subsequently had to overcome,

eroding trust and leaving relational support largely to under-resourced community organisations.

These findings suggest reintegration policy should prioritise relational continuity and practical enablers over programme delivery alone.

Keywords: desistance, reintegration, Aotearoa New Zealand, narrative criminology, reflexive thematic analysis, relational desistance, tertiary desistance

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Introduction

Setting the Scene: Desistance, Identity, and Relational Change

In recent decades, scholars have argued that understanding criminal careers requires equal attention to the process through which offending declines and ultimately ceases. In response, desistance research has become a central focus within criminology, examining how people cease offending and develop lasting non-offending identities (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). This body of work shifts attention from explaining criminality to understanding change, highlighting desistance as a gradual, socially embedded, and identity-related process.

Sustained desistance is therefore not simply a behavioural shift or a single event but a complex and relational process that unfolds over time. For most people on the journey of desistance, and particularly for those with histories of imprisonment, it involves renegotiating self-identity, repairing relationships, and establishing new forms of belonging (Maruna, 2001; McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). In other words, attempts to ‘go straight’ are worked out in everyday interactions with family, services, and communities rather than as an individual endeavour, and these processes are embedded within specific cultural, social, and historical contexts (Deckert, 2020; Webb, 2017).

Desistance in Aotearoa cannot be fully understood without situating it within the country’s specific colonial and socio-political context. Understanding desistance here requires attention to the ongoing effects of colonisation, social inequality, and the disproportionate incarceration of Māori (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; McKenna et al., 2021).

Māori remain significantly overrepresented within the criminal justice system, a pattern linked to histories of land dispossession, cultural disruption, and intergenerational trauma (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; McIntosh & Workman, 2017). Read through Māori justice and health frameworks, in which wellbeing and transformation are understood as collective and relational, desistance is better conceptualised not as individual reform or moral correction but as a process bound up with relational repair, the restoration of mana, and reconnection with whānau and community (Durie, 1998; Jackson, 1988). Building on these understandings, this thesis approaches desistance as a lived, narrated, and relational process (Maruna, 2001; Presser & Sandberg, 2015).

Conceptualising Desistance: Narrative, Identity, and Māori Worldviews

Desistance is typically defined as the process by which individuals cease offending and continue to refrain from criminal behaviour over time (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). Building on this, contemporary scholarship distinguishes between primary desistance, referring to temporary or short-term cessation; secondary desistance, involving the internalisation of a non-offending identity; and tertiary desistance, which concerns the social recognition of that identity by others (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2016).

Rather than representing a linear pathway, these categories highlight how desistance can be uneven, contested, and dependent on both personal change and social response. They provide a useful framework for understanding how behavioural change, identity transformation, and social recognition interact over time, particularly in the context of imprisonment and re-entry.

These frameworks are not, however, culturally neutral. They tend to reflect Western, individualised assumptions about identity, agency, and change, which may not fully capture how desistance is experienced in more relational or collectivist contexts, and they have been criticised for locating the struggle for change within the individuals rather than within the conditions that constrain them (Low, 2025a; Weaver, 2019).

Narrative approaches offer a broader way of understanding desistance by emphasising meaning-making, storytelling, and identity reconstruction. Narrative criminology extends interactionist and cognitive transformation traditions by treating stories not merely as reflections of change but as mechanisms that produce and sustain it (Presser & Sandberg, 2015, 2019). Within this perspective, desistance is not simply about stopping offending. But it entails re-authoring one's life story in ways that make sense of the past and open new futures, reframing earlier experiences and developing forward-looking narratives that support emerging identities (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001).

These approaches align closely with Māori epistemologies, in which knowledge is transmitted through *kōrero*, *pūrākau*, and oral histories, and in which identity is fundamentally relational and rooted in *whakapapa*, linking individuals to *whānau*, ancestors, land, and *wairua* (Durie, 1998; Smith, 2012). Change is thus understood not only as an internal process but as the restoration of balance across relational, spiritual, and communal domains. Read this way, desistance in Aotearoa is entangled with *whakapapa*, *whānau*, and collective identity, and requires sensitivity to Indigenous and relational frameworks of meaning (Cliffe-Tautari, 2024).

Indigenous and Kaupapa Māori criminological scholarship, grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and decolonising methodologies, critiques the individualising assumptions of mainstream criminology and highlights collective wellbeing, relational transformation, and decolonising practice (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Smith, 2012; Tauri, 2013). Although this thesis is not framed as Kaupapa Māori research, it draws upon these perspectives and considers their implications for understanding desistance in Aotearoa.

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

Understanding how people desist from crime carries particular significance in Aotearoa. As at March 2026, 11,255 people were imprisoned, a substantial increase on the 7,702 recorded in December 2021 (Department of Corrections, 2026; Mills & Webb, 2022). Rates of return are similarly high, with almost 60% re-sentenced and 22% re-imprisoned within one year (Department of Corrections, 2022). Desistance, in this context, sustained desistance is the exception rather than the rule, which makes understanding it a central rather than marginal concern.

These patterns fall unevenly. The Department of Corrections (2026) reports that Māori comprise 52.5% of the prison population while representing around 17.5% of the general population (Stats NZ, 2025). This overrepresentation extends across every stage of the criminal justice process and reflects the ongoing effects of colonisation, land dispossession, and structural marginalisation (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Jackson, 1988). Any account of desistance in Aotearoa that does not engage with these conditions risks describing the experiences of Māori without explaining them. This makes attention to Māori perspectives not an additional consideration but a requirement of the subject matter.

Despite the expansion of desistance research, significant gaps persist. Much of the literature is based on Western, male-dominated samples and emphasises measurable outcomes such as employment or reconviction rates, often at the expense of lived experience and cultural context (Deckert, 2020; Taylor, 2008). Indigenous perspectives, particularly those of Māori, are frequently treated as supplementary rather than as fundamental challenges to prevailing theoretical frameworks (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Richards et al., 2020).

In Aotearoa, these limitations have tangible consequences. Mills and Webb (2022) argue that rehabilitative practice here remains dominated by actuarial risk assessment and by cognitive-behavioural interventions that locate offending in individual pathology, and that attempts to make these approaches more culturally appropriate have grafted Māori culture and tikanga onto individualistic frameworks rather than addressing the structural conditions that shape offending among Māori. Where rehabilitation is understood in these terms, the relational, cultural, and structural conditions that may be required for sustained change fall outside what the system is designed to address, and risk perpetuating deficit-based narratives (Deckert, 2020; Jackson, 1988).

This study aims to address these gaps by providing a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of desistance. Theoretically, it approaches desistance as a culturally and relationally embedded process, drawing together narrative criminology, critical perspectives, and Indigenous scholarship. Empirically, it foregrounds narrative accounts from people of Māori, Pasifika, and Pākehā backgrounds in Aotearoa. Practically, it seeks to inform culturally responsive reintegration and justice policy by examining the

relational, structural, and practical conditions that participants identified as sustaining change over the longer term.

Research Question

Building on these observations, this thesis examines the contributors to sustained desistance in the context of Aotearoa. Although the research is not longitudinal, participants had been crime-free for at least four years, allowing it to explore factors associated with durable rather than initial desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). The central research question guiding this study is:

From the perspective of formerly incarcerated people in Aotearoa, what are the most important contributors to their desistance from criminal behaviour?

This question emphasises depth and interpretation over prediction, consistent with the study's qualitative and interpretivist orientation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). By centring the perspectives of formerly incarcerated people, the study examines how change, responsibility, and belonging are understood within their lives, while also considering the cultural and institutional forces shaping these narratives in Aotearoa. Life-story interviews were used to explore how participants interpreted their pathways away from crime, the resources that supported sustained change, and the obstacles they continued to encounter (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Maruna, 2001).

In answering this question, the thesis seeks to contribute a more integrated and culturally attuned understanding of desistance, identifying both protective factors and persistent barriers, and informing pathways toward more effective reintegration policy.

Methodological Orientation and Tikanga Considerations

This research employs a qualitative, interpretivist design grounded in a social constructivist ontology, which holds that reality and meaning are co-constructed through interaction and experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Life-story interviews were selected for their alignment with both narrative criminology and Māori storytelling traditions, enabling participants to articulate their experiences within broader life trajectories (Maruna, 2001; Presser & Sandberg, 2015, 2019). Interviews were conducted in accordance with tikanga-informed practices, emphasising respect, relational engagement, and care for participants' mana, in line with Kaupapa Māori research ethics including whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and cultural humility (Hudson et al., 2010). Guidance from a Māori expert advisor supported culturally appropriate and ethically robust engagement.

Reflexivity was integrated throughout, in keeping with an interpretive orientation in which the researcher's influence is understood not as a threat to objectivity but as integral to a process through which meaning is co-constructed (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). I am a non-Māori New Zealander without lived experience of imprisonment, and I am a Christian, for whom religion and spirituality are personally significant. These positions carry implications for a study concerned with cultural connection and with faith as a potential support for change, and both are examined in detail in Chapter three.

Data analysis employed reflexive thematic analysis, informed by narrative criminology, which conceptualises themes as actively constructed through interpretive

engagement rather than objectively discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Additional methodological details are provided in Chapter Three.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter one introduces the study, outlines its conceptual foundations, and situates it within the context of Aotearoa. Chapter two reviews the desistance literature, critically examining dominant theories and identifying cultural, gendered, and narrative gaps. Chapter three details the methodological approach, including ethical considerations, tikanga-informed practices, and reflexive analysis. Chapter four presents the findings, organised thematically around participants' narratives of desistance. Chapter five discusses these findings in relation to existing literature, with particular attention to identity, relational change, and structural constraint, before considering the study's implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

The literature review has three main purposes. First, it maps the field of desistance research, tracing the evolution of theoretical understandings and empirical findings. Second, it identifies gaps and shortcomings in the current scholarship, particularly the dominance of Western perspectives and the need for greater cultural and gendered analysis (e.g. Deckert, 2020; Rodermond et al., 2016; Taylor, 2008). Third, it situates the present study within this field by showing how it contributes to unresolved questions about the factors that support or obstruct desistance, especially in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Desistance from crime, the process by which individuals cease and continue to refrain from criminal behaviour (Maruna, 2001), is a central concern in criminology, policy, and practice. Yet, it remains a complex and often contested concept. Unlike recidivism, which is measured quantitatively through reconviction data, desistance is a continual state of change, not a one-off event. It is best understood as a dynamic, multidimensional process shaped by interactions between individual agency, social relationships, and structural opportunities (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1993). It is not simply a matter of “not offending” but of identity transformation, the development of new life scripts, and sustained reintegration into prosocial networks. Recognising this complexity is vital, as efforts to reduce reoffending are most effective when they account for the interplay of personal, social, and systemic factors that support change.

Despite growing advocacy for rehabilitation and restorative justice, the “bogeyman” myth (Irwin, 1985, as cited in Maruna, 2001) remains deeply embedded in criminal justice policy and public discourse. The myth rests on a simple but powerful idea: that people labelled as “criminal” are fundamentally different, incapable of change, and destined to reoffend. This echoes what Maruna (2001) identified as the “condemnation script”, the narrative that locks individuals into a criminal identity with no viable exit.

Many individuals and communities now recognise the capacity for change among formerly incarcerated people. Yet, punitive attitudes and structural barriers to reintegration persist, suggesting that the fundamental tension Maruna identified between belief in personal transformation and societal stigmatisation continues to shape desistance experiences. This tension is evident in public opinion data. Burton et al. (2020) found that

around 80% of respondents believed incarcerated individuals could, with the right support and effort, go on to lead productive, law-abiding lives. Yet almost 60% of the same respondents agreed that most offenders are unlikely to change, and 80% felt that some are simply too damaged to recover. The contradiction here is striking: redemption is acknowledged as a possibility, but not one that most people expect to see realised. This matters because belief in redeemability consistently emerges as the strongest predictor of support for rehabilitative and inclusionary policies and is inversely related to punitive ones such as the death penalty and harsher sentencing (Burton et al., 2020; Maruna & King, 2009). When the belief in redemption is absent, the consequences have been severe. Simon (1993, p. 259) describes the result as a “waste management model” of incarceration, one built around containment and cost-minimisation, where “expensive techniques of discipline, training, and normalisation are not warranted, if the basic assumption is that there is no realistic potential to alter the offender’s status as toxic waste.”

Attribution theory offers a useful framework for understanding why this ambivalence exists. Drawing on Heider’s (1958) distinction between dispositional and situational attributions, Cullen et al. (1985) argued that dispositional explanations frame criminal behaviour as the product of fixed individual traits or moral failings, which in turn legitimise punitive responses. In contrast, situational explanations attribute offending to broader social or environmental factors, such as poverty or trauma, making rehabilitative responses more justifiable. Based on Dweck and colleagues’ findings (Dweck et al., 1995), Maruna and King (2004, 2009) introduced a second dimension alongside this internal and

external distinction: whether criminality is understood as fixed or malleable. Fixed beliefs reinforce the idea that individuals cannot fundamentally change, whereas more malleable understandings open up the possibility of redemption and desistance. Attribution theory has been further developed in contemporary research, particularly in relation to beliefs about behavioural stability and changeability (Hoyt et al., 2024; Malle, 2022). This is particularly relevant for desistance, because when criminality is understood as inherent and unchangeable, meaningful change becomes difficult for others to recognise, regardless of the evidence, reinforcing the bogeyman myth.

Maruna and King (2009) suggest that beliefs in redeemability complicate the “once a criminal, always a criminal” narrative. Even when people desist from offending, others may still interpret that change through a fixed-label lens, treating desistance as evidence that the person was never truly criminal rather than as a real process of transformation. In this way, the stigma attached to criminality can persist even after behaviour changes, because observers may preserve a sharp distinction between those seen as inherently irredeemable and those whose change is retrospectively normalised. The effect is a double bind for formerly incarcerated individuals: continued offending confirms expectations of fixed criminal identity. At the same time, successful desistance can be discounted or reinterpreted in ways that diminish the significance of the change.

If public and institutional beliefs so often deny the reality of change, understanding how change actually occurs becomes all the more important. While maturational theories describe desistance as a naturally occurring, age-graded life-course pattern, structural theories emphasise the importance of turning points such as stable employment, strong

family bonds, or religious conversion. More recent interactionist and narrative perspectives highlight the narrative dimension of desistance, arguing that identity reconstruction and cognitive transformation are as crucial as structural supports (Giordano et al., 2002; Presser & Sandberg, 2019). These are best understood not as competing explanations but as complementary dimensions of a single, multi-faceted process; desistance emerges from the interaction between psychological change, social capital, and structural conditions, mediated by cultural context and lived experience.

To analyse this complexity, this review is organised around five key domains consistently identified in the literature as shaping desistance trajectories, moving from the more individual and embodied to the more structural. These are: religion and spirituality, physical activity and exercise, mental health (encompassing trauma and substance use), employment and structural opportunity, and housing. These domains are not an exhaustive list, but serve to draw attention to the broad spectrum of individual, relational, and structural influences. Each domain can also be understood, in the language of desistance scholarship, as offering a different kind of resource or ‘hook for change’ (Giordano et al., 2002) that individuals draw on during the process of change. These are: moral and spiritual frameworks (religion), embodied practices of discipline and identity (exercise), psychological wellbeing (mental health and recovery), and economic and social stability (employment and housing). These groupings are heuristic rather than mutually exclusive; a single domain, such as religion or sport, may function simultaneously as a moral, embodied, social, and identity resource (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001).

Religion and spirituality have long been recognised as a potential catalyst for change. Faith may serve as a “hook for change” (Giordano et al., 2002) by offering redemptive narratives, moral language, and access to prosocial networks (Giordano et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2006). However, its impact varies depending on cultural context, level of spiritual engagement, and the availability of supportive communities (Clear & Sumter, 2002; Said & Davidson, 2023; Stansfield, 2017).

Physical activity and exercise are a newer but growing focus in desistance research. Sport and structured physical activity foster routine, discipline, and visible markers of identity transformation (Nelson et al., 2006; Ugelvik et al., 2025), yet these benefits appear both fragile when access is disrupted and selective and gendered in whom they reach (Meek & Lewis, 2014b).

Mental health support, trauma recovery, and substance use treatment provide critical foundations for sustained desistance. Access to trauma-informed care and culturally responsive mental health services supports the emotional stability and healing necessary for long-term change, particularly when interventions recognise the gendered and cultural dimensions of psychological distress (Deckert, 2020; McKenna et al., 2021; Taylor, 2008).

Employment and structural opportunity are among the most widely studied contributors to desistance. Work can provide stability, routine, and opportunities for social integration (Sampson & Laub, 1993), while also fostering purpose and a positive sense of

identity (Maruna, 2001). Employment can serve as a turning point, though it is equally often a consequence rather than a cause of desistance (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014).

Finally, housing parallels employment as a structural factor, yet existing literature emphasises that its importance extends far beyond material stability. It also supports identity reconstruction, autonomy, and wellbeing by fostering a sense of safety and belonging to a home (Baldry et al., 2006; Bradley et al., 2001; Lutze et al., 2014).

In addition to synthesising existing knowledge, this review highlights the intersections between different domains. Religion may infuse employment with a sense of meaning and purpose, transforming routine work into a form of contribution or moral practice; exercise may reinforce recovery from substance use by providing structure and healthy ongoing coping strategies; supportive work environments may facilitate healing from trauma through stable relationships and a sense of competence; while housing offers the foundational stability that allows meaningful engagement in all other domains to occur (Baldry et al., 2006; Bradley et al., 2001). Equally, failures in one domain often undermine progress in others. An integrated approach is therefore essential. However, the five domains must also be situated within a wider discussion about penal policy. Scandinavian countries, particularly Norway, have developed rehabilitative prison systems that prioritise dignity, normalisation, and reintegration support rather than punishment alone, resulting in the lowest recidivism rates in the Western world (Pratt & Eriksson, 2013). From 2017 to 2020, Norway's two-year post-release reconviction rate sat at 16% in 2020 (Kristoffersen, 2024) compared with a substantially higher rate in Aotearoa, where just under 60% were re-sentences within 12 months of release during 2020/2021 (Department of Corrections,

2022). Despite varying follow-up periods for the Norway and Aotearoa rates, they point towards significantly higher recidivism rates in Aotearoa.

These systems demonstrate that when the domains identified in this review (meaningful work, stable housing, mental health support, and opportunities for identity reconstruction) are systematically integrated into re-entry planning and supported by adequate resourcing, sustained desistance becomes far more achievable. This review therefore considers both what supports desistance at the individual level and the structural conditions necessary to make those supports accessible and effective in the Aotearoa context.

Despite extensive desistance scholarship, important gaps remain. Much of the literature is based in Western contexts, especially those of the U.S. and Europe, with limited attention to Indigenous perspectives or the specific challenges faced by women (Deckert, 2020; George et al., 2020; Rodermond et al., 2016; Taylor, 2008). This is particularly problematic given that Indigenous women represent the fastest-growing incarcerated population in several settler-colonial jurisdictions, yet remain largely absent from desistance research (Brown & Howard-Wagner, 2021; McGuire & Murdoch, 2022). Longitudinal research on the durability of desistance is scarce, and domains such as physical activity are comparatively underexplored (Jugl et al., 2023). In Aotearoa, the structural effects of colonisation, the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system, and the intergenerational impact of trauma require particular attention (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; McKenna et al., 2021). Cunneen and Tauri also suggest that addressing these

gaps is essential not only for advancing academic debates but also for informing effective, culturally responsive policy and practice.

Theoretical Foundations

Before turning to the five domains in detail, it is necessary to establish the theoretical foundations that underpin this field. Desistance research has been shaped by a range of perspectives, from early maturational theories that emphasised age and developmental change (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Steinberg, 2008), to social and structural accounts that emphasise informal social bonds, including employment, marriage, and community relationships, as mechanisms promoting desistance (Sampson & Laub, 1993). More recent interactionist and narrative approaches highlight identity transformation, cognitive shifts, and the construction of new life stories (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). These theories not only provide different explanations for why people stop offending but also shape how scholars interpret empirical findings across various domains, including religion, exercise, mental health, employment, and housing. This chapter therefore reviews the major theoretical contributions to desistance, identifies their limitations, and highlights the need for more critical, gendered, and culturally responsive perspectives before turning to the thematic domains in greater depth.

Maturational and Structural Theories

Early explanations of desistance framed it as a natural or structural process. Maturational reform theories propose that individuals “grow out” of crime as they age, with the age–crime curve showing a peak in offending during adolescence and a decline in

adulthood (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Steinberg, 2008). The Gluecks' longitudinal research suggested that biological, psychological, and emotional development contribute to this pattern (Glueck & Glueck, 1974). Neuroscience research further supports this view, demonstrating that adolescent brains are still developing, particularly in areas governing impulse control, risk assessment, and long-term planning (Steinberg, 2017). Given that most individuals engage in some form of antisocial behaviour during youth but naturally desist as they mature, permanent criminal labelling and lifelong stigmatisation risk interrupting these normative developmental processes. Rather than supporting natural desistance, policies that impose enduring markers of criminality may trap young people in deviant identities that would otherwise have been temporary phases of development (Moffitt, 1993; Tannenbaum, 1938). While these theories highlight important developmental processes, critics argue they oversimplify by treating desistance as automatic, overlooking the role of social context, inequality, and personal agency (Weaver, 2019).

Social and structural theories, by contrast, emphasise the external conditions that shape offending. Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory identifies attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief as protective factors against delinquency. Differential association theory (Sutherland, 1939) highlights the role of social networks, suggesting that associations with prosocial peers can promote conformity. Building on this, Sampson and Laub (1993) identified key "turning points" such as employment and marriage, arguing that these strengthen informal social control and embed individuals within prosocial routines that support desistance (Sampson & Laub, 1993). These approaches shifted focus toward

context and opportunity, but they too oversimplify desistance, treating individuals as passive recipients of social forces.

Interactionist and Narrative Theories

Interactionist theories integrate internal and external perspectives, emphasising how individuals interpret life events. Giordano et al. (2002) proposed a cognitive transformation theory consisting of four interdependent stages: openness to change, exposure to “hooks for change,” reinterpretation of the past, and construction of a new prosocial identity. This framework emphasises the role of agency and meaning-making, demonstrating that the same event (e.g., parenthood, employment) can produce different outcomes depending on individual interpretation. The emphasis on internal cognitive and emotional shifts represented a major step beyond structural or maturational explanations of desistance, acknowledging that change must be both experienced and understood by the person involved.

Building on this, narrative criminology extends the interactionist and cognitive transformation traditions by treating stories not merely as a reflection of change, but as mechanisms that produce and sustain it (Presser & Sandberg, 2015, 2019). Maruna’s (2001) foundational study demonstrated how “redemption scripts” allow individuals to reframe their criminal pasts as sources of insight, resilience, and moral learning, while condemnation scripts, which are stories of inevitability and failure, often sustain offending. Through storytelling, people impose coherence on fragmented experiences, construct moral identities, and communicate accountability. As narrative identity theorists argue, people construct and maintain a sense of self through the internalised, evolving stories

they tell about their lives (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This claim finds clear resonance in criminological accounts of desistance as identity transformation. In this sense, desistance is not only behavioural but profoundly narrative; to desist is to tell a new kind of story about oneself (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

As Maruna (2025) observes, “unlike statistics, stories by their nature humanize the storyteller” (p. 16). This humanising function is particularly fundamental for individuals with criminal records, who are often reduced to abstract risk categories or stigmatising labels. Narrative accounts restore complexity, agency, and moral worth to people whose humanity has been systematically denied through processes of criminalisation and incarceration. By telling their stories, desisters resist objectification and reclaim their capacity to be understood as whole persons with meaningful pasts, present struggles, and hopeful futures.

Redemption stories are especially powerful in this regard. They provide a pathway and possibility that can inspire people to believe they can change (Maruna, 2025; O’Sullivan et al., 2018). As one formerly incarcerated person explained to advocate Gethin Jones, “hope” was an acronym that stands for “Hearing Other People’s Experiences”, a recognition that personal narratives of transformation offer not just information but inspiration and practical guidance for navigating reintegration (Maruna, 2025). These stories can also shift public attitudes, challenge punitive assumptions and help people see formerly incarcerated individuals as whole persons capable of change rather than permanent threats (Butler et al., 2023; Maruna & King, 2009). In this sense, redemption narratives serve a dual function: they support individual desistance by providing cognitive

and emotional frameworks for change, while simultaneously challenging the structural and cultural barriers that make desistance difficult.

Narrative criminology's contribution rests in its recognition that stories both reveal and constitute agency. Presser (2016) argues that narrative is a form of social action; stories can resist stigma, reproduce oppression, or signal moral renewal. By attending to narrative form and content, researchers can trace how individuals claim moral worth and social belonging in contexts that have long denied them legitimacy. This positions narrative criminology as both a theoretical and ethical shift within desistance research. It centres lived experiences, interrogates structural inequality, and connects individual transformation to broader cultural and institutional narratives (Presser & Sandberg, 2019). Moreover, narratives are culturally mediated; how one tells a story of change depends on available cultural scripts, faith traditions, and social expectations. In Aotearoa, this means understanding desistance narratives as entangled with whakapapa, whānau, and collective identity, requiring sensitivity to Indigenous and relational frameworks of meaning (Cliffe-Tautari, 2024).

Interactionist and narrative perspectives ultimately converge on the view that desistance is a dialogical process: it unfolds through ongoing interactions between the self and society, where identity, meaning, and belonging are continually negotiated. This understanding provides a conceptual bridge between the internal psychological process of transformation and the external social conditions that either reinforce or undermine them, laying the theoretical foundation for exploring the domains of religion, exercise, mental

health, employment, and housing as overlapping narrative and structural pathways to change.

Labelling Theory and the Levels of Desistance

Labelling theory adds another dimension which can assist in understanding desistance. Becker (1963), Lemert (1951), and Tannenbaum (1938) argued that societal reactions to crime, through processes of stigmatisation, exclusion, and moral judgement, can shape an individual's self-concept and behaviour. Early labelling theorists distinguished between primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance refers to the initial act of rule-breaking that may be relatively minor and not yet internalised as part of one's identity. Meanwhile, secondary deviance arises when societal reactions cause the individual to internalise the label. Once publicly defined as 'deviant' or 'offender', a person may come to see themselves primarily through the lens of criminality, trapping them in a self-fulfilling cycle of marginalisation and reoffending. In this way, the societal response can perpetuate offending by limiting opportunities for employment, housing, and belonging, factors all central to desistance. These labelling processes remain highly relevant in contemporary contexts. In Aotearoa, as in many jurisdictions, formal disclosure requirements institutionalise stigma and create structural barriers to legitimate work long after an offence, a dynamic explored further in the employment section below.

Maruna and Farrall (2004) applied this to desistance. They distinguished between primary desistance, which is temporary lapses in offending, and secondary desistance, identity change leading to sustained desistance. McNeill (2016) further extends this with the concept of tertiary desistance, highlighting that successful reintegration requires not

only internal identity change but also external recognition and acceptance by society. Thus, desistance involves more than ceasing crime; it depends on breaking the cycle of stigma and enabling individuals to be seen, and to see themselves as capable of good.

It is important to note, however, that these three levels do not represent a fixed sequence. Individuals need not achieve secondary desistance before progressing toward tertiary desistance, and movement between levels may be fluid and non-linear for many. Drawing on Mead (1934), scholars in the stigma tradition, including Goffman (1963) and Becker (1963), have long recognised that shifts in self-perception are often driven by changes in how others regard us, meaning that social recognition can precede and indeed enable internal identity change rather than follow it.

This recognition of tertiary desistance represents a crucial shift in how desistance is conceptualised. Maruna (2025, p.13) captures this reorientation, arguing that promoting desistance is “less about changing individual lives... and more about making substantial social and structural changes” affecting all system-impacted people. From this perspective, desistance demands reform of social structures and cultural attitudes as much as change in individual behaviour and identity: reducing stigma, removing barriers to employment and housing, and creating conditions that enable rather than obstruct reintegration (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2015). This structural dimension is not new; it was present in early desistance scholarship (Maruna, 2001) and in arguments that supporting desistance requires engaging with people’s social circumstances rather than individuals alone (McNeill & Weaver, 2010), yet subsequent research and policy have continued to privilege individual-level intervention over systemic reform (Maruna, 2025; Weaver, 2019).

Critical Perspectives

While classic and interactionist theories have significantly advanced understanding, critics argue that they often underplay the roles of gender, culture, and structural inequality.

Gendered Perspectives

Women's desistance pathways differ markedly from men's, yet most theories are based on male samples, since men form the majority of the prison population (Rodermond et al., 2016). This risks reinforcing male-centric assumptions about turning points such as marriage or employment. Women's offending is more strongly associated with trauma, victimisation, substance use, and caregiving responsibilities (Deckert, 2020; Richie, 2001; Taylor, 2008), which shape how they experience opportunities for change.

While men often "marry up" by partnering with prosocial women (Laub et al., 1998), women are more likely to partner with anti-social men, which can undermine change (Rodermond et al., 2016). Parenthood also has a greater impact on women than on men. Studies show that having children is more strongly linked to desistance for women (Benda, 2005; Giordano et al., 2011; Gunnison, 2001; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). When pregnancies were wanted, offending tended to decrease (Bakken, 2009; Giordano et al., 2011), though crime may rise again after childbirth (Monsbakken et al., 2013).

Living arrangements also matter. Mothers with children in the home were less likely to deal drugs, though this did not significantly impact non-drug offending (Griffin & Armstrong, 2003). Women who planned to live with their children after release were more likely to join post-release employment programmes, which supported desistance (Robbins

et al., 2009). Caregiving and relational commitments can thus operate as powerful hooks for change, fostering responsibility and motivation for reform (Giordano et al., 2002). However, such effects are strongly conditioned by structural realities: access to housing, treatment, adequate income, and supportive services remains uneven and often precarious for women leaving prison (Baldry, 2006; Taylor, 2008). Consequently, traditional desistance models centred on male experiences risk overlooking the gendered dynamics of care, trauma, and social support that underpin women's pathways out of crime, underscoring the need for gender-responsive and trauma-informed interventions.

Cultural and Indigenous Critiques

In Aotearoa, Māori are disproportionately incarcerated, yet desistance theories are often derived from Western contexts that prioritise individual agency, rational choice, and individual moral reform. This limits their cultural applicability and risks overlooking the collective, relational, and spiritual dimensions of change that are central to Indigenous worldviews.

The harms of incarceration are themselves collective and intergenerational: Deckert's (2020) 'daughters inside' theory, for example, links the imprisonment of Māori fathers to heightened risks of abuse and subsequent criminalisation among Māori daughters, demonstrating how colonisation and incarceration perpetuate cycles of harm across whānau (McIntosh & Workman, 2017). If the consequences of imprisonment extend beyond the individual in this way, then pathways out of offending cannot plausibly be understood in individual terms alone, a point developed by Māori-centred accounts of change (Cliffe-Tautari, 2024; Workman, 2016).

Indigenous and Kaupapa Māori criminological scholarship, grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and decolonising methodologies, critiques the individualising assumptions of mainstream criminology (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Smith, 2012; Tauri, 2013). Within Māori justice and health frameworks, wellbeing and transformation are understood as collective and relational, embedded in whānau, whakapapa, and wairua (Durie, 1998; Jackson, 1988). However, mainstream desistance research has seldom engaged with these frameworks, and explicitly Māori-centred examinations of pathways away from offending remain limited (Cliffe-Tautari, 2024).

Marchetti and Daly (2017), examining Indigenous sentencing courts in Australia, found that culturally grounded justice practices, centred on community participation, accountability, and healing, supported pathways to desistance by addressing both structural disadvantage and emotional repair. Similarly, Richards et al. (2020) explored Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's desistance narratives, showing how redemption was constructed through reconnection to culture, spirituality, and community obligations. These studies demonstrate that desistance among Indigenous peoples is deeply entwined with processes of cultural reclamation and collective healing, rather than individual cognitive transformation alone, the focus of Western-dominant desistance.

Recent theoretical work has begun to examine the boundaries of desistance scholarship itself. Low (2025a) reviews longstanding criticisms of the field, that it is overly agentic and preoccupied with male, "pale" and heterosexual samples drawn from a small number of Western jurisdictions, and argues that more recent scholarship complicates them, while noting that these developments remain emerging rather than well established.

Two of her arguments bear directly on the present study. The first is that desistance theorising has limited explanatory power in contexts of what she terms “disproportionately disadvantaged agency”, where structural constraint is such that desistance is not a realistically attainable goal. The second is that desistance scholarship should not be siloed but treated as complementary to broader critical and structural theorising, including work on colonialism and structured violence. Read alongside the Indigenous and Kaupapa Māori scholarship outlined above, this suggests that historical, cultural, and colonial factors are not context surrounding desistance but constitutive of the conditions under which it becomes possible. Desistance cannot, on this reading, be reduced to individual motivation or psychological readiness; it is better understood as a process of relational repair, social recognition, and cultural restoration. For Aotearoa, this means desistance research and policy must engage meaningfully with Māori and Pacific worldviews, recognising that reintegration is not only about avoiding reoffending but also about restoring mana, identity, and belonging within a relational social order.

Intersectionality and Inequality

Criminologists argue that theories often ignore how race, class, gender, and marginalisation intersect to shape desistance opportunities (Weaver, 2019). Schinkel (2014) argues that punishment communicates moral meanings and can shape experiences of stigma and recognition. However, her analysis gives less attention to how broader inequalities, including race, class, gender, and marginalisation, shape these processes. Structural factors such as discrimination, precarious labour, and the stigma of a criminal record can limit access to turning points traditionally linked to desistance such as

employment or stable housing (Farrall et al., 2010; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). Gendered analyses further reveal that women's desistance is often linked to caregiving and trauma recovery rather than conventional turning points like marriage or work (Rodermond et al., 2016; Sered & Norton-Hawk, 2014). Intersectional approaches therefore advance a more contextually grounded understanding of desistance as a socially situated process shaped by inequality, opportunity, and recognition (Weaver, 2019).

These perspectives caution against universalising desistance models and point to the need for theories that account for diversity in pathways, recognise cultural and structural contexts, and avoid treating desistance as linear or uniform. Classic, interactionist, narrative, and critical theories each capture part of a multidimensional process. Biological development, social structures, individual agency, identity work, and broader cultural and systemic contexts all interact to shape desistance trajectories. These insights provide the foundation for analysing the five domains explored in this chapter: religion and spirituality, physical activity and exercise, mental health and substance use, employment and structural opportunity, and housing.

Domains of Desistance

Religion and Spirituality

The first domain examined in this review is religion and spirituality. This is among the longest-standing themes in desistance scholarship. Research indicates that religious participation is generally associated with lower rates of offending and recidivism (Baier & Wright, 2001). Although more abstract than structural factors such as employment or housing, religion provides an important psychological and social framework through which

individuals interpret and sustain behavioural change. A growing body of research demonstrates that religiosity and spirituality can contribute meaningfully to both the initiation and maintenance of desistance, though their effects vary across contexts and over time.

Giordano et al. (2008) explored the role of religiosity in desistance through both qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis. In their qualitative data, many individuals attributed their sustained desistance to spirituality, describing faith as central to their transformation and emphasising its profound personal significance. One participant in their study said, “The only thing that’s kept me from going to prison is... God” (Giordano et al., 2008, p. 118), with many others echoing similar sentiments. Giordano and colleagues also draw attention to the social benefits of spirituality, noting that it often helped participants build connections with pro-social others, providing not only moral frameworks but also supportive communities where individuals hold each other accountable and encourage mutual growth.

However, their quantitative findings suggest a more limited effect, with religiosity not emerging as a strong predictor of long-term desistance. Rather than reflecting a contradiction, this discrepancy points to a difference in what each method captures. Quantitative measures assess observable behavioural outcomes, whether individuals continue to offend, whereas qualitative narratives capture how individuals interpret and make sense of change. As a result, religion may be experienced as central to desistance at the level of identity and personal narrative, even if its independent effect is less clearly detectable in statistical models once other structural factors are considered. This

highlights the value of mixed-method approaches in desistance research: qualitative data reveal the internal, meaning-making processes that underpin change. In contrast, quantitative data assess the extent to which these changes are reflected in sustained behavioural outcomes.

Religion can play a vital role in facilitating cognitive transformation, the internal shift in thinking that allows individuals to reconstruct their life goals. Giordano et al. (2002) and Maruna et al. (2006) argue that faith offers a ready-made framework for redemption narratives, enabling people to reinterpret their pasts as part of a moral journey toward renewal. Religious practices such as prayer, confession, and fellowship can reinforce prosocial self-concepts and create opportunities to enact new roles, consistent with the idea of “secondary desistance” where identity change becomes internalised.

Beyond cognitive shifts, religion has also been linked to resilience, a key factor in sustaining desistance. In a survey of 769 prisoners across 12 US states, Clear and Sumter (2002) found that higher religiousness was associated with better psychological adjustment to imprisonment and fewer disciplinary confinements. Similarly, O'Connor and Perreyclear (2002) observed that engagement in prison religious programmes was associated with prosocial support and reduced misconduct. Although these studies concern adjustment during imprisonment rather than re-entry itself, they suggest that faith can cultivate the psychological endurance and emotional regulation that individuals carry into the post-release period.

However, religion's influence is neither uniform nor universally beneficial. Stansfield (2017) demonstrated that its effects differ across racial and ethnic groups, with religiosity predicting stronger desistance among some populations than others. Cultural context, denominational norms, and community acceptance all mediate how faith is expressed and experienced (Stansfield, 2017). Such findings caution against treating religion as a one-size-fits-all solution; instead, its effectiveness depends on how well it aligns with the individual's background, values, and social environment.

Bakken et al. (2013) further distinguish between religious affiliation and personal spirituality, arguing that spiritual connection, rather than institutional membership, drives the desistance process. Their research suggests that intrinsic faith, marked by personal reflection and moral commitment, predicts better outcomes than nominal religious participation. This distinction echoes broader desistance literature emphasising internal motivation and authenticity over compliance with external expectations.

However, drawing on Hirschi (1969) and Sutherland (1939), involvement within religious institutions would also be expected to support desistance through increased exposure to pro-social others and the strengthening of conventional social bonds. This suggests that while personal spirituality may be central to how individuals understand their change, institutional religion may still play a practical role by providing supportive social networks.

Despite its potential benefits, religion also faces structural and institutional limitations. Said and Davidson (2023) found that while faith-based initiatives often promote

belonging and accountability, they may fail to meet individualised needs or accommodate non-traditional spiritual expressions. Some participants reported feeling rejected or judged by religious institutions, which undermined rather than strengthened their reintegration efforts. Structural barriers, such as limited access to faith communities post-release or inconsistent chaplaincy support, further constrain religion's impact.

Finally, faith alone is rarely sufficient for enduring desistance. Studies note that even those with firm religious convictions sometimes relapse into offending or substance use when confronted with poverty, stigma, or mental health challenges (Said & Davidson, 2023). Religion can ignite transformation, but sustained change requires concurrent progress in other domains: secure housing, meaningful work, supportive relationships, and effective mental health care.

Faith, then, can start a transformation it cannot finish on its own. It provides moral frameworks, redemptive narratives, and emotional resilience which depend on authenticity and social context, and lasting change appears to require spiritual conviction to be matched by structural stability and belonging.

Physical Activity and Exercise

Physical activity and sport are emerging as significant yet underexplored contributors to desistance. While less frequently studied than employment or religion, exercise provides both physical structure and symbolic meaning that can support behavioural change, emotional regulation, and identity reconstruction (McGannon et al., 2020; Nelson et al., 2006). Within correctional and community contexts, sport-based

interventions have been shown to promote discipline, self-control, and social connection, factors consistently associated with the desistance process (Jugl et al., 2023; Meek & Lewis, 2014a).

Structured exercise programmes within prisons have been found to foster routine and a sense of purpose. In a pilot study of a prison-based rehabilitative programme, Nelson et al. (2006) found that three-quarters of participants reported reduced depression, stress, and anxiety from regular moderate exercise, and over 80% intended to continue exercising after release. However, these findings rest entirely on self-report. Similarly, Jugl et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis of sport-based interventions demonstrated modest but consistent improvements in self-esteem, emotional regulation, and social skills, key precursors to prosocial identity development.

Exercise can also operate as a form of embodied identity transformation. Ugelvik et al. (2025), in their study of Norwegian prisoners, found that running provided participants with a sense of progress, discipline, and personal control, reinforcing their self-perception as capable and responsible individuals. Although the study did not explicitly examine desistance, these findings illuminate processes, such as commitment, structure, and self-regulation, that are central to the desistance journey. The daily routine of running served both symbolic and practical functions: symbolising commitment to change and providing a controlled environment for self-reflection. Similarly, McGannon et al. (2020) argue that physical activity facilitates recovery and emotional wellbeing by reducing anxiety, improving mood, and enhancing self-efficacy.

From a narrative perspective, Maruna (2012) notes that visible bodily transformation can serve as a tangible signal of change. Physical improvements act as markers of moral reform, demonstrating to oneself and others that ‘the old me’ is being replaced with a more disciplined and healthy self. In this way, the body becomes both the site and the symbol of desistance, reinforcing redemption narratives and supporting the internalisation of prosocial identities (Ugelvik et al., 2025).

However, the benefits of exercise are not universal or guaranteed. Ugelvik et al. (2025) caution that any desistance process that hinges too much on one specific activity is vulnerable, particularly given that physical activity almost inevitably leads to injury-related setbacks and periods of involuntary inactivity. Their participants described experiencing depression and suicidal ideation when unable to run or failing a running challenge. One participant stated, “The depression I got after [failed running challenge attempt] got really ugly. I didn’t talk to anybody about it, I just wanted to go hang myself” (Ugelvik et al., 2025, p. 114). Ugelvik and colleagues conclude that recreational running may therefore paradoxically both strengthen the desistance process and increase its fragility. Research further indicates that when exercise becomes a compulsive or sole outlet for stress management, disruption can lead to increased distress, risk of relapse, and symptoms such as depression and withdrawal (Lichtenstein et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the significance of physical activity in desistance appears to be both selective and gendered. Ugelvik et al. (2025) note that running and exercise are only effective for those with high motivation to change, suggesting it is not universally relevant. This echoes Giordano et al.’s (2002) argument that hooks for change depend on prior

openness to change: exercise does not generate the motivation to desist so much as give existing motivation a structure and outlet. In this respect, physical activity resembles other domains, such as religion, whose influence likewise varies with the depth of individual engagement. Consistent with the gendered patterns discussed earlier, exercise features predominantly in men's desistance narratives, where it is described as an emotional outlet and coping strategy during high-stress periods.

In contrast, in Taylor's (2008) open-ended study of women's reoffending in Aotearoa, physical activity did not feature in participants' accounts. Instead, they centred on relational motivations such as regaining custody of children or rebuilding family connections (Taylor, 2008), and facing distinct barriers to accessing sport in custodial settings (Meek & Lewis, 2014b). This gendered pattern raises questions about whether the growing research focus on physical activity inadvertently privileges masculine experiences of desistance while marginalising the distinct pathways and priorities that characterise women's journeys away from crime.

These limitations do not mean exercise is unimportant for desistance; rather, its benefits appear to depend on who is engaging with it and what else supports them. When integrated within broader supports rather than relied upon in isolation, sport's psychological benefits are well established. Physical activity provides routine, community, and achievement, mirroring the stabilising effects of employment and housing, while enhancing mental health and emotional regulation (Meek & Lewis, 2014a; Nelson et al., 2006). Exercise can function as a space for identity reconstruction, allowing individuals to enact new, prosocial selves through discipline, persistence, and self-control (Maruna,

2012). Physical activity, then, contributes to desistance not as a stand-alone intervention but as one strand of a wider process, a source of structure, belonging, and resilience whose value depends on what else is in place.

Mental Health, Trauma, Substance Use

Mental health and substance use represent some of the most persistent and complex barriers to desistance. High rates of comorbidity undermine stability and increase the likelihood of reoffending (Göbbels et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2021). Desistance is not simply a matter of behavioural control but often requires deep psychological healing, trauma resolution, and sustained access to treatment and support services.

In the Aotearoa context, Indig et al. (2016) document the scale of this challenge, finding that nearly all incarcerated individuals (91%) have a lifetime mental health or substance use disorder, with over 40% experiencing co-occurring disorders. Such comorbidity compounds the effects of social marginalisation and makes rehabilitation efforts more difficult to sustain post-release. Without integrated and accessible treatment, individuals often cycle between periods of stability and relapse, undermining long-term desistance.

Depression represents a particularly significant challenge within this constellation of mental health issues. Research suggests that persistent offenders often experience a developmental shift from the heightened positive emotionality associated with offending in adolescence to feelings of regret, sadness, and depression in adulthood (Giordano et al., 2007). This emotional transition makes it difficult for individuals to envision concrete

pathways out of crime, as depression undermines the hope, agency, and future-orientation necessary for constructing redemptive narratives and pursuing prosocial goals (Giordano et al., 2007; Maruna, 2001). Moreover, depression among chronic offenders reflects a form of learned helplessness, a psychological state in which repeated failures, stigmatisation, and blocked opportunities lead individuals to believe that change is impossible (Miller & Seligman, 1975). Maruna (2001) identifies this fatalistic outlook as central to condemnation scripts, narratives characterised by determinism and the inability to imagine life outside of crime. Unlike redemption scripts, which reframe the past and envision prosocial futures, condemnation scripts trap individuals in identities defined by failure and deviance, reinforcing the very behaviours they might otherwise seek to abandon. When combined with substance dependence and unresolved trauma, depression creates compounding barriers to sustained change.

Trauma plays a particularly significant role in shaping these outcomes. Taylor (2008) found that women released from prison in Aotearoa frequently reported histories of sexual abuse, violence, and victimisation that predated their offending. Substance use often functioned as a coping mechanism for unaddressed trauma, creating a cycle of dependence and criminalisation. Taylor's participants described long waiting lists and bureaucratic barriers making it hard to access methadone and other treatment programmes. The inability to stabilise drug use following release heightened the likelihood of relapse and further offending, revealing how structural failings in treatment access can perpetuate offending trajectories.

The growing emphasis on trauma-informed care reflects recognition that traditional correctional and treatment approaches often retraumatise rather than heal. Tripodi et al. (2022) compared two evidence-based trauma interventions with incarcerated women, finding that both approaches reduced symptoms and supported emotional regulation. Grady et al. (2024) conducted a scoping review of behavioural health interventions for trauma-exposed adults in custody, concluding that while trauma-informed programming shows promising effects on behavioural health symptoms, the evidence base remains limited by a scarcity of randomised trials, methodologically weak study designs, and predominantly white, female samples.

Deckert's (2020) *Daughters Inside* theory situates women's offending and recovery within broader relational and cultural contexts, showing how cycles of harm, care, and connection shape pathways through the justice system. While her work does not focus primarily on desistance, it provides valuable insight into how trauma, colonisation, and relational disruption influence women's capacity for change. Complementary research by McIvor et al. (2004) and Sharpe (2015) shows that women's desistance is often grounded in healing relationships, caregiving roles, and the rebuilding of trust after trauma. Trauma-informed approaches to desistance therefore require attention not only to individual pathology but also to social, cultural, and gendered environments that shape offending and recovery.

Göbbels et al. (2016) further explore how desistance unfolds for individuals with mental illness, proposing that internal motivation, hope, and a sense of purpose are crucial even when symptoms persist. Mental illness does not preclude desistance, but it

complicates the process by limiting access to stable relationships, employment, and self-efficacy. These findings echo the Good Lives Model (Ward & Maruna, 2007) and Ward et al.'s (2004) readiness model, which emphasise the importance of aligning treatment with an individual's values, goals, and stage of change. Desistance requires psychological readiness and internal resources as much as external opportunity.

The life-course framework also provides important insight into how mental illness and substance use interact with desistance. Moffitt's (1993) taxonomy distinguishes between adolescence-limited offenders, whose criminal behaviour declines with maturity, and life-course-persistent offenders, whose antisocial patterns are rooted in neuropsychological and environmental disadvantage. For the latter group, substance use often acts as a "snare," trapping individuals in cycles of offending and dependence that prevent age-related desistance. Hussong et al. (2004) similarly describe substance abuse as a developmental snare that disrupts normative transitions into adulthood, such as education, employment, and stable relationships, thereby prolonging criminal trajectories.

Colman and Vander Laenen (2012) offer an important conceptual distinction between recovery and desistance. While recovery involves achieving and maintaining sobriety, desistance encompasses broader social reintegration, including stable housing, employment, and identity transformation. Recovery may be a necessary step toward desistance, but it is not sufficient on its own. The two processes are complementary yet distinct: one focuses on overcoming addiction, the other on constructing a prosocial life.

Structural disadvantage and stigma exacerbate these challenges. Fisher et al. (2006) argue that individuals with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders face persistent discrimination in employment, housing, and community reintegration. These barriers create a feedback loop of exclusion: unemployment and homelessness worsen mental health, which in turn undermines stability and increases the risk of relapse. Addressing these systemic barriers is therefore as critical to desistance as individual treatment or motivation.

Across these studies, desistance in the context of mental illness and substance use emerges as a deeply biopsychosocial process. Biological vulnerabilities and psychiatric conditions interact with psychological readiness and social context to shape outcomes. Trauma-informed, integrated treatment approaches, those that address mental health, addiction, and social reintegration simultaneously, offer the most promising pathways (Colman & Vander Laenen, 2012; Ward et al., 2004). However, sustained underfunding, long waitlists, and punitive attitudes toward addiction continue to undermine progress, especially for women and other marginalised groups (Indig et al., 2016; Rizzo et al., 2022; Vidal Infer et al., 2025). These barriers are particularly evident in Aotearoa, where systemic shortages in mental health and addiction services have limited rehabilitation outcomes and disrupted continuity of care post-release (McKenna et al., 2021). Addressing these structural constraints is essential for sustainable recovery: desistance is most likely when therapeutic progress aligns with external stability. This is when healing, opportunity, and belonging converge. That dependence on external stability points directly to the domains examined next: employment and housing.

Employment and Structural Opportunities

Employment has long been identified as one of the most significant factors influencing desistance from crime. Work provides structure, economic stability, and opportunities for social integration that support behavioural change (Sampson & Laub, 1993). These experiences may also contribute to the development of a prosocial identity (Maruna, 2001). However, research also shows that employment's role in desistance is complex: while stable work can reinforce change, it is not always the initial cause of it (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014; Uggen, 2000). Its effectiveness depends on individual readiness, the subjective meaning attached to work, job quality, and the broader structural environment in which reintegration occurs (Giordano et al., 2002; Farrall et al., 2010).

Sampson and Laub's (1993, 2003) age-graded theory of informal social control was foundational in identifying employment as a significant "turning point" in the life course. Their longitudinal research showed that steady work strengthens social bonds, promotes responsibility, and anchors individuals in routines that are incompatible with criminal behaviour. Employment functions as a stabilising force, offering daily structure and reinforcing the social expectations of law-abiding life. This insight positioned work as both a social and moral institution through which people reconnect to conventional society.

However, not everyone benefits from employment in the same way. Giordano et al. (2002) emphasise the importance of cognitive readiness, the internal motivation to change, as a precondition for work to serve as a turning point. For those who view work merely as a requirement rather than a meaningful opportunity, employment may provide financial stability without fostering genuine identity transformation. Desistance, therefore, depends

not only on having a job but on how the individual interprets that job as part of a new life narrative.

The quality and meaning of work also matter. Uggen (1999) found that employment in higher-quality jobs, occupations rated as more satisfying by workers nationally, reduced both economic and non-economic offending among released high-risk individuals, even after accounting for selection into employment. In contrast, wages and job tenure alone had no significant effect. By contrast, low-quality or precarious work may increase frustration and reinforce marginalisation. When employment is unstable, underpaid, or fails to provide dignity, it may fail to generate the social capital or sense of belonging necessary for sustained change (Farrall et al., 2010; Sampson & Laub, 2003; Weaver, 2019). Meaningful employment supports behavioural stability and, beyond it, the reconstruction of a prosocial identity, fostering a sense of purpose and connection (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Maruna, 2001). This challenges simplistic 'work equals desistance' assumptions and points to the need for policies that prioritise meaningful, supportive employment pathways.

Recent work has begun to specify the mechanism underlying these effects. Drawing on interviews with 15 predominantly Māori women with histories of imprisonment in Aotearoa, Low (2024) argues that employment supported desistance particularly through its contribution to identity and relational desistance rather than through income or occupational stability alone. Notably, she identifies employers themselves as active participants in this process, capable of extending or withholding the recognition on which relational desistance depends, while also documenting the barriers that Indigenous

women in particular face across multiple intersecting sites of inequality. This suggests that employment may matter less as a discrete domain than as a site through which recognition and identity change are accomplished, though whether the same holds for other recognised domains remains largely untested.

Narrative approaches offer further insight into how work contributes to identity reconstruction. Maruna (2001) showed that desisters often frame employment as part of a redemptive life story, interpreting their work as evidence of personal reform and social contribution. Through this lens, work becomes more than a means of survival: it is an expression of moral renewal, what Maruna terms 'generative' activity, where individuals seek to give back to others. This aligns with Giordano et al.'s (2002) concept of hooks for change: employment becomes transformative when it is incorporated into a coherent, self-authored narrative of redemption.

However, Skardhamar and Savolainen (2014) argue that employment is often a consequence rather than a cause of desistance. Their research suggests that people who are already desisting, demonstrating motivation and stability, are more likely to obtain and maintain employment. In this view, work consolidates rather than initiates change. This bidirectional relationship highlights that employment interacts with other domains, such as mental health, housing, and social support, rather than operating independently.

Despite its potential benefits, numerous barriers limit access to meaningful employment for people leaving prison. Stigma and discrimination remain pervasive, as employers may be reluctant to hire individuals with criminal records (Pager, 2003). In

Pager's audit experiment, matched applicants with a criminal record were only one-half to one-third as likely to be considered by employers. Disclosure laws often require individuals to reveal convictions, creating persistent barriers even years after an offence. Many also face limited education, low vocational skills, and patchy work histories, making it difficult to compete in the labour market. Furthermore, the rise of precarious or 'gig' work reduces stability and benefits, limiting the protective value employment once offered (Standing, 2011). These barriers can create cycles of exclusion, where the inability to secure stable employment undermines confidence, financial security, and ultimately desistance itself.

Employment's influence is therefore best understood as contextual and interactive. It provides daily structure, social validation, and a sense of purpose, but only when accompanied by internal motivation and supportive conditions (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Giordano et al., 2002). Programmes that integrate employment assistance with cognitive and social support, such as job coaching, skills training, and restorative re-entry initiatives, are more likely to produce lasting outcomes (Bushway & Apel, 2012; Graffam et al., 2004; Lutze et al., 2014). For some individuals, especially those with complex needs or health challenges, voluntary work, education, or caregiving roles can also fulfil similar generative functions (Barry, 2006; Maruna, 2001). These findings highlight that sustainable desistance depends less on employment alone than on the quality of re-entry support and the opportunities available for individuals to find meaning, contribution, and social recognition. Work, in short, is a critical but insufficient condition for reintegration. Its impact depends on quality, readiness, and the removal of barriers such as stigma and precarious labour.

Housing

Stable housing is widely recognised as a cornerstone of successful reintegration and desistance. As Bradley et al. (2001, p. 1) observe, “housing is the lynchpin that holds the reintegration process together.” Beyond providing shelter, housing offers structure, safety, and stability, conditions essential for rebuilding a prosocial life after imprisonment. Consistent evidence shows that secure housing reduces reoffending and supports employment, health care, and family reconnection (Baldry et al., 2006; Keene et al., 2018; Lutze et al., 2014; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2016).

Understanding how housing supports desistance requires attention to both structural and psychological dimensions. Socio-spatial criminologists argue that the places where people live can either constrain or enable change (Flynn, 2010; Hunter & Farrall, 2015). Relocation can help individuals “knife off” criminogenic networks and construct new identities (Maruna & Roy, 2007), while homelessness or unstable accommodation can trap them within offending environments. At a psychological level, housing contributes to ontological security, a sense of stability, privacy, and control over one’s life (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Giddens, 1991). Michalsen’s (2019) qualitative study of 100 formerly incarcerated mothers offers an unsettling parallel: for her respondents it was the prison cell, not a home, that provided the private, sober space. She found that incarceration itself was among the most salient turning points women reported. It was not valued as punishment but as enforced time and space, “a room of one’s own”, for sobriety and self-reflection. She cautions, however, that whether these turning points translate into sustained desistance depends heavily on post-release practicalities such as stable

housing, employment, and continued sobriety, which frequently prove overwhelming. Conversely, the impermanence, punitive rules, surveillance, and lack of control, characteristic of much post-release accommodation erode the sense of control on which ontological security depends, undermining autonomy and wellbeing (Rosenberg et al., 2021). A private space to retreat to and establish one's own routines can therefore serve as both a physical and psychological foundation for desistance and identity change (Maruna & Roy, 2007), though, as Michalsen's account underscores, only where such accommodation is genuinely available after release.

Empirical studies further reinforce the centrality of housing in the reintegration process. In Aotearoa, post-release housing shortages remain a significant barrier. Many are placed in emergency motels or hostels characterised by instability, constant surveillance, and limited privacy, undermining wellbeing (Low et al., 2025; Martin et al., 2021). Residents in Low et al.'s (2025) study described these environments as emotionally taxing and reminiscent of prison, eroding trust and triggering relapse. Conversely, stable and autonomous housing provided space for reflection, routine, and separation from criminal peers, supporting the "knifing-off" process (Maruna & Roy, 2007). In Mills et al.'s (2025) study of people released from Aotearoa prisons, those in stable housing six months after release were 4.6 times less likely to be reimprisoned within the first year than those in unstable housing (7% versus 34%). The evidence was mixed, however: associations between housing and re-sentencing, and between residential mobility and recidivism, were weak and non-significant, and the study could not establish a causal relationship. Mills and colleagues suggest that stable housing may matter most for preventing the more serious

offending that leads back to prison. The pattern is also consistent with housing instability being entangled with wider disadvantage rather than operating alone. Housing stability, in other words, works in tandem with socioeconomic resources rather than on its own.

The cultural significance of housing adds another layer of complexity, particularly in the context of Aotearoa. For Māori, housing carries cultural meaning beyond individual shelter. Concepts of whānau, whakapapa, and whenua link home to collective identity and belonging (Cram, 2020; Low et al., 2025). Secure housing can therefore enable tertiary or relational desistance by supporting reconnection with family and community (McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). However, Māori and Pasifika individuals often face discrimination in the rental market (Harris et al., 2006), restrictive parole conditions (Faure, 2019), and housing policies grounded in Western nuclear-family norms (Howden-Chapman et al., 2013; Jackson, 1988). A Kaupapa Māori approach reframes housing as a relational space that should facilitate hosting whānau and rebuilding collective support. Without culturally responsive options, reintegration efforts risk becoming forms of ‘white-knuckled desistance,’ that is, desistance sustained by willpower alone rather than community connection, an approach that research bridging recovery and desistance suggests is rarely sustainable (Best et al., 2017).

Finally, it is not only the presence of housing but its quality and meaning that shape reintegration outcomes. Recent research stresses that secure, comfortable homes foster routines, wellbeing, and identity transformation, whereas low-quality or temporary housing undermines control and can perpetuate stress, unemployment, or relapse (Low et al., 2025; Mills et al., 2025; Rosenberg et al., 2021). A stable home also enhances ‘recovery

capital', the personal and social resources that sustain recovery from addiction and offending (Best & Hennessy, 2022).

Housing, then, functions as both a structural resource and a psychological anchor for desistance. Like employment, housing alone cannot sustain desistance, but little else is sustainable without it. It provides the stability required for employment, health, and family life while supporting ontological security and self-redefinition. However, in Aotearoa, limited housing supply and culturally narrow policies continue to undermine these benefits (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2023; Waitangi Tribunal, 2023). Expanding access to secure, quality, and culturally grounded housing is therefore central to enabling genuine reintegration and long-term desistance.

Interaction of Domains

While the previous sections have explored religion, physical activity, mental health, employment, and housing as largely distinct domains, desistance in practice is best understood through their interdependence. Change rarely emerges from a single factor; instead, it unfolds through the interaction of psychological transformation, social opportunity, and structural stability. Examining how these domains reinforce one another reveals that sustainable desistance depends on their alignment, and that housing, in particular, functions as the essential foundation upon which other domains rest (Baldry et al., 2006; Bradley et al., 2001; Low et al., 2025).

Among the most significant intersections is that between religion and employment, where faith can imbue work with moral meaning and a sense of purpose. Giordano et al.

(2002) and Maruna (2001) note that religious belief often provides the motivational and moral scaffolding that enables individuals to interpret work as a redemptive act. Faith-based re-entry programmes that integrate vocational training with spiritual mentoring help transform employment into a lived expression of repentance, service, and hope. Through this combination, work becomes not just a means of survival but an avenue for moral repair and social contribution.

Exercise also intersects with spirituality: for some, the disciplined, ritualistic nature of physical activity parallels spiritual practice, producing structure, self-knowledge, and agency that reinforces the internal coherence of a desistance narrative (Maruna, 2012; Ugelvik et al., 2025).

The intersection between employment, housing, and trauma recovery illustrates how material stability enables psychological and behavioural change. Secure housing provides the conditions under which employment becomes possible, offering safety, routine, and a fixed address required for job applications, appointments, and reliable attendance (Bradley et al., 2001; Baldry et al., 2006). Without a stable home base, participation in employment, therapy, or community life becomes logistically and emotionally untenable. Housing, therefore, functions as the structural prerequisite that makes other desistance-promoting activities plausible and sustainable.

Housing also enhances access to treatment and social support. Stable accommodation allows individuals to maintain medication routines, attend counselling sessions, and engage consistently with probation or support workers. In contrast, housing

insecurity disrupts treatment adherence and undermines psychological stability, often precipitating relapse and reoffending (Keene et al., 2018; Lutze et al., 2014). For those recovering from trauma or addiction, a safe home is more than shelter; it is a therapeutic space that enables reflection, recovery, and connection (Low et al., 2025; Low & Mills, 2025). In this sense, housing amplifies the effectiveness of interventions across every other domain, transforming fragmented efforts into a coherent process of change.

The cumulative evidence underscores the need for holistic, integrated re-entry models. Programmes that combine secure housing, employment pathways, counselling, and community mentoring consistently achieve better outcomes than isolated interventions (Baldry et al., 2006; Lutze et al., 2014). These models recognise that desistance involves aligning cognitive, emotional, social, and material dimensions of life. For instance, employment programmes are more successful when participants have stable housing, while faith-based and exercise initiatives are more sustainable when daily living conditions are secure. Integration and coordination across services are thus essential to maintaining momentum and preventing relapse. Moreover, stable housing provides individuals with the privacy and security needed to engage meaningfully in spiritual or religious practices, allowing faith to function as a genuine source of reflection, stability, and personal transformation (Cram, 2020; Maruna et al., 2006; Rosenberg et al., 2021).

Comparative insights from Scandinavian rehabilitative systems further demonstrate the power of integration. Under the principle of normalisation, imprisonment in countries such as Norway and Sweden seeks to mirror ordinary community life. Access to education, employment, physical activity, therapy, and post-release housing is treated as a right rather

than a privilege (Pratt & Eriksson, 2013). Housing continuity ensures that individuals are not released into homelessness but into structured environments where employment and treatment are readily accessible. This approach reflects a collective ethos that rehabilitation is a shared social responsibility, a stark contrast to the fragmented, punitive, and under-resourced re-entry systems standard in Aotearoa and the United States (Pratt & Eriksson, 2013; Te Uepū Hāpai i te Ora, 2019).

Desistance, on this evidence, arises from the meeting of internal transformation and external stability. Each domain supplies something the others cannot: moral direction, purpose, discipline, and emotional steadiness. However, housing is what anchors them in daily life. Without a stable home, participation in work, treatment, or spiritual practice is precarious; with one, the same activities become sustainable, and rehabilitation has somewhere to take root.

Shortcomings of Current Desistance Literature

Despite the significant progress made in desistance research over the past three decades, key gaps remain in both theory and practice. Much of the existing literature isolates individual domains, such as employment, religion, or mental health, without fully accounting for how these factors interact dynamically over time. This reductionist approach risks oversimplifying desistance as a series of discrete “turning points” rather than a multidimensional and context-dependent process. As the preceding sections have demonstrated, sustained desistance is best understood through the interplay of structural opportunity, psychological readiness, and social connection. However, research that empirically captures these intersections remains limited.

Theoretical and Conceptual Gaps

While foundational, life-course and social control theories primarily explain desistance through external social bonds such as employment and marriage (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Subsequent scholars have argued that these approaches give comparatively less attention to cognitive transformation, identity, emotion, and meaning-making (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). There remains a need for integrative frameworks that reconcile internal and external dimensions of desistance, capturing how identity transformation is both enabled and constrained by social structures such as housing, labour markets, and stigma.

Moreover, desistance research continues to reflect Eurocentric and male-centric biases. As Rodermond et al. (2016) and Taylor (2008) note, most studies derive from samples of men in Western contexts, marginalising women, Indigenous peoples, and other culturally distinct populations. Feminist and decolonial perspectives, such as Deckert's (2020) *Daughters Inside Theory*, offer important correctives, demonstrating that pathways to desistance are shaped by gendered trauma, relational care, and cultural belonging. However, these perspectives remain peripheral in mainstream criminology. Future research must embed gendered, cultural, and Indigenous frameworks at the centre of desistance theory rather than treating them as exceptions to dominant models.

Although relationships feature predominantly across diverse theories of desistance, they are typically examined through specific theoretical mechanisms rather than as a central principle in their own right. For example, social bonds underpin structural theories through informal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1993), identity reconstruction occurs

through relational recognition and changing social contexts (Maruna, 2001), and hooks for change are often initiated through interpersonal relationships that disrupt established patterns of offending. Similarly, caregiving and family ties are prominent in women's pathways (Rodermond et al., 2016; Taylor, 2008), whānau and whanaungatanga are foundational to Māori understandings of wellbeing and reintegration (Durie, 1998; Workman, 2016), and tertiary desistance itself is defined by social recognition and belonging (McNeill, 2016; McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). Weaver (2019) comes closest to centring relationality, and Low (2024) demonstrates the pattern for employment specifically. However, across the field, relationships tend to be positioned as features of other domains; a marriage effect, a family reunification outcome, a source of social capital, rather than examined as a potential foundation on which other desistance supports depend. Whether these domains operate independently, or only through the relationships in which they are embedded, remains an open question.

Empirical and Methodological Gaps

Desistance research increasingly draws on interpretivist and social constructionist perspectives, shifting emphasis from static measures of offending to the meaning of narratives individuals construct about change. Such approaches recognise that desistance is not simply evidenced through objective data (e.g. criminal records or employment status), but is experienced subjectively, through evolving identities, shifting motivations, and personal reflections on life transitions. Albertson (2015) claims that objective measures are too commonly used to explain subjective changes.

Methodologically, there is also an overreliance on Western, urban, and male prison populations. For example, Sampson and Laub's (1993) influential longitudinal study followed delinquent boys from Boston, illustrating the historical reliance on male urban samples that has characterised much of the foundational desistance literature. This geographic and demographic concentration limits transferability across cultural contexts, rural settings, and women's pathways to desistance. Recent work has begun to address some of these limitations. Low (2024) and Michalsen (2019) demonstrate how gendered and relational factors shape desistance differently for women, while Garcia-Hallett (2022) provides rich ethnographic insight into the lived experiences of mothers navigating re-entry. Norman et al. (2024) offer comprehensive scoping reviews that reveal ongoing gaps in physical activity research, particularly regarding cultural responsiveness and long-term sustainability. However, longitudinal research tracking multiple intersecting domains over extended periods remains scarce, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Aotearoa, for example, faces unique challenges arising from colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Jackson, 1988). However, there is relatively little empirical work exploring desistance through culturally grounded frameworks or Indigenous worldviews that emphasise collective wellbeing, whakapapa (genealogy), and relational identity. Addressing this gap requires research that honours Māori perspectives and incorporates Kaupapa Māori methodologies to better reflect local realities of rehabilitation and reintegration.

Policy and Practice Gaps

On a practical level, service delivery remains fragmented and reactive.

Rehabilitation programmes frequently operate in silos, targeting discrete problems, addiction, unemployment, or housing instability, without recognising their interdependence (Baldry et al., 2006; Lutze et al., 2014; Larsen & Hean, 2021). This fragmented approach undermines continuity of care and places the burden of coordination on individuals least equipped to manage it. Evidence from holistic re-entry initiatives (Baldry et al., 2006; Lutze et al., 2014) demonstrates that outcomes improve when housing, employment, health, and social support are delivered through coordinated frameworks. In many systems, however, including Aotearoa's, this coordination remains the exception rather than the rule.

Moreover, the punitive legacies of Anglo-American correctional systems continue to shape re-entry experiences. Despite recognition that desistance requires structural and societal change (McNeill & Weaver, 2010), policy remains dominated by risk management rather than reintegration, emphasising surveillance over support (Pratt & Eriksson, 2013). Comparative analyses highlight how Scandinavian penal models, rooted in normalisation, welfare, and rehabilitation, achieve lower recidivism rates precisely because they treat housing, education, and employment as public entitlements rather than individual responsibilities (Pratt & Eriksson, 2013). In contrast, Aotearoa and similar jurisdictions often release individuals into precarious conditions that make desistance structurally improbable. There remains an urgent need for policy frameworks that recognise rehabilitation as a collective social investment rather than a conditional privilege.

Positioning the Present Study

This thesis seeks to address several of these gaps. It examines desistance holistically, attending to psychological change, social context, and structural opportunity within a single analysis, and drawing on the Indigenous and gender-informed critiques outlined above, while resisting the tendency of existing theories to overemphasise either personal agency or external control. While previous studies, such as Giordano et al. (2002), have shown that internal motivation and moral transformation are critical, fewer have examined how such change is sustained over the long term, and through what mechanisms. This study addresses that gap by exploring how the domains identified in this review feature in the accounts of people who have sustained desistance over several years, and, in particular, whether these domains operate as independent contributors to change or through the relationships and meanings in which they are embedded.

The research also contributes to the limited body of Aotearoa-based desistance studies by situating participants' experiences within the broader sociocultural and colonial context of Aotearoa, acknowledging the enduring impacts of social inequality, institutional racism, and cultural dislocation on both offending and pathways out of it. By incorporating Indigenous and gender-informed perspectives, the study responds to calls for greater cultural responsiveness and moves beyond deficit-based models towards a strengths-based understanding of how belonging, purpose, and stability foster long-term change.

Finally, this thesis responds to the policy gap between rehabilitative ideals and practice. By highlighting the necessity of integrated, person-centred re-entry systems, where housing, treatment, employment, and relational support operate in tandem, it seeks

to inform evidence-based reform that aligns with restorative and welfare-oriented principles. Answering these questions requires a methodology capable of capturing how people themselves narrate and make sense of long-term change; the following chapter outlines the approach taken, including how participants' accounts were gathered and analysed.

Methods

Building on the gaps and limitations identified in the preceding literature review, particularly the need for culturally grounded qualitative research, narrative depth, and a more integrated understanding of desistance, this chapter outlines the philosophical and methodological foundations of the study. Guided by an interpretivist and social constructivist epistemology, this study adopts a qualitative, narrative-focused approach that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their own change processes. This philosophical orientation aligns closely with the study's central research question: *From the perspective of formerly incarcerated people in Aotearoa New Zealand, what are the most important contributors to their desistance from criminal behaviour?*

To address this question, this chapter details the rationale for using unstructured life-story interviews, the purposive sampling strategy, the integration of culturally responsive and Kaupapa Māori aligned practices, and the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021a) to interpret participants' accounts, detailed in the Data Analysis section. The ethical considerations, reflexive practices, and trustworthiness strategies are also outlined to demonstrate how methodological

coherence, cultural safety, and analytical transparency are maintained throughout the research process.

The chapter first turns to the study's philosophical orientation: an interpretivist, socially constructed understanding of reality that underpins the approach to knowledge, interviewing, and analysis.

Philosophical Orientation and Methodological Framework

This study is grounded in an interpretivist philosophical orientation and a social constructivist ontology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). For desistance research, this means the object of inquiry is not whether reoffending declined but how participants themselves interpret and give meaning to their change. This distinction shaped every subsequent design decision, from the choice of unstructured interviews to the treatment of themes as co-constructed rather than discovered.

Interpretivist inquiry is particularly well-suited for desistance research, as it enables the examination of the subjective and dynamic processes of personal change. As Farrall and Calverley (2006) emphasise, desistance is a gradual, negotiated, and non-linear process that cannot be adequately captured by quantitative measures alone. Their work, alongside that of Amemiya et al. (2017), Giordano et al. (2008), and Weaver (2019), demonstrates the importance of a more qualitative, narrative approach to exploring how internal motivation interacts with social and cultural contexts over time.

In Aotearoa, this interaction is further shaped by colonial history, social inequality, and Indigenous worldviews that emphasise collective rather than individual identity. A

constructivist–interpretivist stance suits this context: it treats meaning-making as situated in cultural, relational, and historical circumstances, and sits comfortably alongside Kaupapa Māori principles, which understand knowledge as relational and grounded in whanaungatanga (relationships) and manaakitanga (care and respect) (Hudson et al., 2010; Smith, 2012).

This study adopts a narrative criminological and interpretative phenomenological framework. Narrative criminology provides tools for examining how people use stories to construct meaning, shape identity, and guide their future behaviour (Fleetwood et al., 2019; Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Stories do not merely reflect experiences; they actively help individuals reinterpret their past actions and imagine new identities (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002). Narrative-based inquiry has also proven productive in desistance research specifically; Albertson (2015), for example, shows how creative narrative methods can surface the cognitive and emotional shifts associated with moving away from crime.

An interpretive phenomenological framework deepens this narrative focus by emphasising the interpretation of individuals' experiences rather than merely describing them (Smith, 1996). While narrative criminology highlights how individuals construct and communicate their stories, interpretive phenomenology attends to the meanings, perceptions, and subjective understandings that underlie those stories. Crucially, this approach rejects the notion of bracketing the researcher's assumptions; instead, it recognises that the researcher's prior knowledge, values and experiences inevitably shape interpretation and should be engaged with reflexively rather than set aside (Finlay, 2008).

This is why reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) fits the study: the analysis is treated as co-constructed, grounded in both participants' meanings and researchers' reflexivity.

This narrative–interpretivist stance underpins the use of RTA as the study's primary analytic method. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021a) developed RTA as a flexible yet systematic approach to identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The method recognises that analysis is an active and creative process shaped by the researcher's engagement with the data. Rather than aiming for objectivity, RTA acknowledges that themes are inevitably influenced by the researcher's perspective (Gough & Madill, 2012).

Reflexivity, or attending to how background and assumptions shape research, is central to this study and integral to RTA's epistemological foundations (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). Reflexive practice occurs across multiple levels: personally, through reflection on the researcher's worldview and likely biases (Wilkinson, 1988); functionally, by documenting methodological decisions and interpretive shifts in analytic and field notes; and disciplinarily, by questioning the criminological assumptions embedded in concepts such as rehabilitation, reform, and morality (Lumsden & Winter, 2014; Weaver, 2013). Within the Aotearoa context, reflexivity also encompasses cultural reflexivity, acknowledging how colonial structures and non-Indigenous perspectives may influence interpretation and interaction with participants; my positionality as a non-Māori, Pākehā individual without lived experience of incarceration shapes all aspects of the research process, from data collection to interpretation. Guidance from a Māori expert advisor supported consistency with Kaupapa Māori ethical principles. A detailed discussion of researcher reflexivity and positionality, including the ethical and cultural dimensions of

conducting cross-cultural research within a Kaupapa Māori-informed framework, is provided later in this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The central research question guiding this study is: *From the perspective of formerly incarcerated people in Aotearoa New Zealand, what are the most important contributors to their desistance from criminal behaviour?*

Desistance is an evolving process shaped by social, psychological, and structural factors, as evidenced by substantial research (e.g. Farrall, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Weaver, 2013). As Farrall and Calverley (2006) emphasise, qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to examining how people make sense of change over time, moving beyond behavioural indicators of reoffending to consider how identity, motivation, and context interact.

Narrative inquiry provides the conceptual foundation for this research, recognising that stories are central to how individuals construct and communicate their identities. Maruna (2001) and Presser and Sandberg (2019) highlight that storytelling enables individuals to reinterpret their pasts and envision prosocial futures, serving as both a tool for meaning-making and a mechanism for transformation. The study prioritises participants' voices, exploring how they understand and discuss different factors in their journeys away from crime.

The study is further informed by Kaupapa Māori principles, which foreground relationality, reciprocity, and collective wellbeing. A Māori expert advisor contributed to the research design to support cultural appropriateness across recruitment, interviewing, and

interpretation. The expert advisor's input at the design stage shaped concrete decisions: the recruitment approach, the framing of the information sheet and interview invitation, and how whānau and collective wellbeing would be understood in the study, with supervision providing continuity thereafter.

Data were collected using unstructured, life-story interviews (Brinkmann, 2020; Lima, 2023). Follow-up questions were used when participants did not raise domains highlighted in previous research on their own. Participants were free to give these domains little or no weight; when a domain was prompted rather than spontaneously raised, this was noted and accounted for in the analysis. This flexible approach allowed participants to lead their storytelling while ensuring coverage of prominent domains in the literature. Most interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed following RTA's six-phase process: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participants in this study were formerly incarcerated adults residing in Aotearoa. This group was selected because their reflections give valuable insights into the cognitive, relational, and structural factors that support or hinder desistance. Inclusion criteria required participants to be over 18 and to have served time in a New Zealand correctional facility. Participants also needed to self-identify as crime-free for at least four years before participation. This approach prioritises subjective meaning in line with interpretivist and narrative principles, rather than externally verified measures of change. The four-year timeframe was chosen to increase the likelihood of observing secondary desistance

(Maruna & Farrall, 2004) and to offer deeper insight into sustaining long-term change. While Nadesu's (2008) analysis focuses on reconviction and re-imprisonment rather than direct measures of criminal activity, it provides valuable context: within one year of release, 26% of the sample were re-imprisoned, whereas in the fourth year, only a further 5% were imprisoned. These findings suggest that after four years, long-term sustained desistance is more likely, supporting the relevance of the chosen timeframe.

This study utilised a purposive sampling strategy, with participants recruited via gatekeepers (Campbell et al., 2020), making sure that participants possessed relevant lived experience and could provide detailed accounts of desistance. This method is consistent with qualitative and narrative research, which prioritises depth and diversity of meaning over statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015). Recruitment aimed to include participants with variation in age, gender, ethnicity, offence history, and time since release, recognising that multiple, intersecting factors influence desistance; however, given the small sample size, achieving complete variation was unlikely and was not a primary requirement. Particular attention was paid to including Māori and Pasifika participants, recognising their overrepresentation in the justice system and the importance of their perspectives for understanding desistance in this context.

Participants were recruited through several channels. Three were recruited via a staff member at Prison Care Ministries, who approached potential participants and, with their consent, passed their contact details to me. One participant was given my contact details through a research supervisor and made contact directly. The coordinator of Coast Community Trust initially referred the final participant; when initial contact lapsed, he was

re-approached through a personal contact of mine and subsequently agreed to participate. This participant was known to me only by reputation, having previously spoken publicly about his experiences; this is addressed further in the discussion of researcher positionality.

The final sample comprised five participants, which was sufficient for the research aims and provided the depth needed to support thorough analysis. This sample size was considered adequate for achieving 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016), recognising that data adequacy depends on quality and richness rather than volume. Factors such as the specificity of the study's aim, the depth of each interview, and the analytic strategy shaped this determination. While traditional data saturation, when no new themes emerge, is often used as a marker of adequacy (Guest et al., 2006), Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021b) argue that saturation is not achievable within RTA, but instead that the researcher actively generates themes through sustained, reflexive engagement with the data. Accordingly, RTA foregrounds the principle of 'meaning sufficiency' or 'theoretical sufficiency,' where data collection concludes once sufficient analytical depth and diversity have been reached to meaningfully answer the research question, rather than upon reaching a hypothetical saturation point (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the five participants.

Table 1*Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Approx age	Offence type	Approx sentence	Time since released	Distinctive feature
Blyndside	Māori-German	Not stated	Long-term offending; substance related; gang background	20-22 years	4 years	Lifetime parole; extensive reintegration support; articulate systemic critique
Mark	Cook Island	40s	Violence and substance related	In and out over 20+ years	6 years	Long cycling; recovery, faith, son as anchors
John	Not stated	60+	Serious violent offence	20 years total	>4 years (per criteria)	Single catastrophic offence; conventional background; declined recording
Russell	Not stated	Not stated	Assault; drink-driving	4 years total	> 4 years (per criteria)	Mid-apprenticeship; no children; relationship-focused; people-pleaser
Violet	Samoan	Not stated	Benefit Fraud	3 months	> 4 years (per criteria)	Only woman; poverty-driven offence; faith central

Note. All names are pseudonyms. Ages, sentences, and release timeframes are approximate to protect identity.

All participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Informed consent was obtained before participation. Each participant received a small koha (prezzy card), in recognition of their time, consistent with ethical and cultural practices in

qualitative research in Aotearoa. To avoid coercion, the participants were not aware of the koha until after the interview was completed.

Data Collection Procedures

I conducted unstructured, life-story interviews, aligning with the study's interpretivist and narrative orientation. This approach enabled participants to share their experiences in their own words. It facilitated exploration of domains relevant to the existing literature, including religion and spirituality, physical activity, employment, housing, and mental health. Social relationships were not among these prompted domains; they were raised spontaneously by every participant, and their emergence as a central factor is addressed in the analysis. When participants did not address domains identified in past research or within the current study, I asked follow-up questions if they were deemed relevant to the participant.

Interviews took place at semi-public locations selected by each participant, including parks and a café adjacent to a public library. The café was an ideal location because it was quiet and had few people around. It was also very spread out, meaning no one could overhear the interview. Allowing participants to choose the venue supported their comfort and autonomy. It ensured settings that were private enough for confidential conversations yet public enough to ensure the safety of both parties. One interview took place at the Hub, the office building of Coast Community Trust and the church I attended. This offered a meeting room where the interview could not be overheard, with staff nearby. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and two and a half hours. Most were audio-recorded with participant consent. One participant, John, did not consent to audio-

recording. With his agreement, detailed notes were taken instead, including verbatim phrases. Only these verbatim phrases are presented as direct quotations, and interpretations of his account are made with appropriate caution.

The interviews provided an open space for participants to share their life stories freely. I opened each interview with prompts such as, “Can you tell me your life story with as much or as little detail as you would like?” This format facilitated rich, storied accounts that aligned with the study’s narrative and phenomenological framework.

Particular care was taken when engaging with Māori and Pacific participants. The research process was guided by the principles of whanaungatanga (relationship-building), manaakitanga (respect and care), and tikanga (appropriate protocol), in line with Kaupapa Māori research ethics (Smith, 2012). Time was allowed before and after each interview for whakawhanaungatanga, acknowledging the relational and collective dimensions of storytelling. Most of the participants continued their kōrero after the recording ended. One of the supervisors acted as the Māori expert advisor.

I wrote down field notes immediately after each interview to capture contextual details, nonverbal cues, and my reflections. These notes complemented the audio recordings and supported later reflexive analysis. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. All participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts to confirm that their views were accurately represented; however, none chose to do so. The accounts generated are understood not as unmediated reports but as

situated narratives co-constructed within the interview relationship, a framing consistent with the study's narrative-criminological and reflexive orientation.

Data Analysis

Analysis was primarily inductive, with themes generated from participants' accounts rather than a pre-existing coding frame. In keeping with RTA's rejection of the idea that researchers approach data as blank slates (Braun & Clarke, 2021a), my engagement was informed by domains identified in the literature review; however, these functioned as sensitising concepts during interviewing rather than as themes, and the themes ultimately generated did not map onto them. The fact that the analysis moved away from the domain structure I brought to the study reflects the inductive orientation of the approach: themes followed the patterns of meaning in participants' accounts rather than the categories anticipated from previous research, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021a) account of primarily inductive analysis within RTA.

For example, while the literature review organised desistance contributors into discrete domains such as employment, housing, and physical activity, participants rarely raised these spontaneously; they typically emerged only when prompted. Even then, participants did not describe these domains as helpful in themselves, but only where they rested on a relational foundation or provided dignity, meaning, and opportunity. This distinction, between a domain being present and a domain being meaningful, is reflected in the relational and meaning-centred framing of the final themes.

The study employed RTA, which offers a flexible yet rigorous framework for analysing meaning across qualitative data while maintaining a reflexive awareness of my interpretive role. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021a) six-phase process: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) constructing themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. While these stages are presented sequentially, the process is inherently recursive and iterative, involving continuous movement between data, codes, and interpretation.

During familiarisation, I read all interview transcripts multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of each participant's story. I took initial notes on early impressions while considering how my assumptions might shape interpretation. One thing I noticed quickly was how structurally different each individual's story was: one organised as a systemic critique, another as a faith-anchored narrative. Yet across these very different tellings I noted that participants rarely made excuses, even while describing real constraints. It was also evident very quickly how little participants spontaneously brought up the domains I expected. Rather than a formal reflexive journal, reflexive engagement was documented through post-interview field notes, analytic notes made during familiarisation and coding, and discussions with supervisors.

Coding was conducted manually. Each transcript was coded line by line, with codes and their associated data extracts compiled in a single working document organised into overarching themes. Across the five transcripts, this produced approximately 160 initial codes, ranging from semantic labels that stayed close to the participants' own language, such as "earned trust", to more interpretive codes such as "institutionally-conditioned

distrust.” This connected participants’ descriptions of survival inside prison with the slow, demonstrated-through-action way they described rebuilding relationships after release. The latter fed directly into the trust erosion strand of theme 2, illustrating how codes developed during this phase shaped later theme construction.

Themes were then developed by grouping codes around candidate central organising concepts. Early candidate themes were provisional, and several did not survive. For example, an initial candidate theme of “desire to change as a necessary precondition” was abandoned when it became clear that it functioned as a topic summary rather than a theme: several participants touched on wanting to change, but none explored it in depth, and the codes grouped under it shared a subject matter rather than a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Themes were then compared across participants to explore both convergences and divergences in their experiences of desistance.

Reviewing themes involved refining and testing the coherence of each theme against the dataset, ensuring that each captured a meaningful and distinct aspect of participants’ narratives. During this process, I considered how themes reflect intersections of personal, relational, and structural factors. The clearest example of this refinement was abandoning a theme, as mentioned above.

In defining and naming themes, each was articulated clearly and supported by vivid, representative data extracts. The goal was to interpret, not merely describe, participants’ meaning-making processes, demonstrating how they understand and sustain desistance across various domains.

Finally, the findings were woven into a cohesive account that connects participants' experiences with desistance theory and highlights their relevance for policy and practice. Themes were interpreted in light of the Aotearoa context, incorporating Kaupapa Māori perspectives where relevant.

Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was a central analytic tool. I engaged in continuous reflection on positionality, emotional responses, and interpretive choices, which I documented through post-interview field notes and analytic notes during coding. Peer debriefing with supervisors and consultation with the Māori expert advisor further enhanced analytic rigour and supported cultural sensitivity. Rather than aiming for consensus or objectivity, credibility was established through transparency, depth of interpretation, and engagement with complexity (Tracy, 2010).

Trustworthiness and Rigour

In qualitative research, rigour is established through transparency, reflexivity, and the fit between the question, method, and analysis, rather than through standardised measures of validity or reliability. Consistent with the interpretivist and RTA framework guiding this study, trustworthiness was pursued through strategies that enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility was pursued mainly through prolonged engagement with the data, including repeated readings of each transcript, and through iterative interpretation, in which codes and themes were repeatedly revisited and refined against the full dataset. Analytic decisions were discussed in regular supervision, providing an external check on

interpretation. The most consequential of these discussions concerned how I attended participants' accounts during analysis. My supervisors encouraged me not to take interview content at face value, but to consider the manner in which things were said. For instance, whether a participant leant in, lowered their voice, or hesitated before speaking. This prompted me to return to the audio recordings alongside the transcripts, and to treat tone and delivery as part of the meaning being conveyed rather than incidental detail. Participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts; while none elected to do so, the offer ensured participants retained control over their contributions.

Dependability and confirmability were addressed together through documentation and external checking. Dependability was supported by the audit trail described above; the working analytic document and post-interview field notes, so that the interpretive path from data to conclusions can be traced, supporting transparency without implying replicability in the positivist sense. Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are grounded in the data rather than in unexamined researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); in RTA, however, researcher subjectivity is treated as an analytic resource rather than a contaminant (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). Thus, confirmability rests on reflexivity rather than neutrality. Post-interview field notes and analytic notes made during coding documented my influence on interpretation. At the same time, regular supervisor and peer debriefing, including consultation with the Māori expert advisor, acted as reflective checkpoints, providing critical reflection and cultural guidance. Examples of this reflexive work, including revisions to initial interpretations, are presented in the positionality

discussion, most notably the revision of my initial interpretation of Violet's account and the identification of a leading question posed to Russell.

Transferability examines how findings may be applicable in other settings. While generalisation is not the goal of qualitative research, rich, detailed descriptions let readers judge whether the findings apply elsewhere (Geertz, 1973). Participants' narratives are presented at length and in their own words, enabling readers to assess how insights about desistance in Aotearoa may resonate elsewhere.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC), which approved the study on 28/10/2025 (reference 25/303). This ensured respect for participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and wellbeing. Working with formerly incarcerated individuals required care to prevent harm, coercion, or re-traumatisation, and to make participation voluntary and safe without putting anyone at risk.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their interview. Each participant received an information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights to withdraw without consequence. The consent process emphasised that participation is entirely voluntary, that declining or withdrawing will not affect access to any services, and that participants may choose not to answer any question at any time. All participants opted to provide consent verbally, and the consent was audio-recorded.

Confidentiality was protected throughout the research process. I assigned pseudonyms in all transcripts, analyses, and reports, and identifying details such as names, locations, or specific organisations were removed or altered to prevent recognition. Audio recordings and transcripts are stored securely on encrypted, password-protected drives accessible only to the research team. Data will be retained for six years after publication, in accordance with institutional policy, before being securely destroyed.

Because the interviews were life-story interviews, the participant steered the conversation, potentially avoiding emotionally sensitive topics when desired. However, discussing past offending, trauma, and reintegration challenges, the interviews may have evoked emotional distress for some participants. I adopted a trauma-informed interviewing style, remaining alert to signs of discomfort and offering breaks or termination of the interview if needed. Participants were also given contact details for support services, including counselling and reintegration programmes. AUT provides free counselling to those who require support as a result of participating in research. Consequently, this contact information was made available to all participants.

Cultural safety and respect for tikanga (customary values and practices) were embedded in the research process. Informed by Kaupapa Māori principles, I sought to ensure that engagement with Māori participants was relational, respectful, and reciprocal. Guidance from the Māori expert advisor, particularly during the design of the study, supported cultural appropriateness in areas such as language use and understandings of whānau and collective wellbeing.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

As outlined above, RTA treats the researcher's subjectivity as an analytic resource; this section examines mine specifically. Reflexivity involves recognising and critically examining how one's background, values, and assumptions shape all stages of the research process, from framing the topic and interacting with participants to interpreting and representing their narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). This reflexive stance acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed through relationships, dialogue, and interpretation rather than discovered objectively.

My interest in desistance and reintegration stems from both academic and applied experience, particularly my engagement with the literature on redemption and condemnation scripts, and a desire to understand how these processes unfold in Aotearoa. This interest was deepened by my experience supporting a young man with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD); given the overrepresentation of people with neuro-disabilities in the justice system, this work strengthened my commitment to helping those who offend to build stable lives away from crime. This positionality brings insight into the complexities of offending, rehabilitation, and policy, but also requires vigilance against assumptions about what "successful" desistance should look like. Reflexive practice ensures that interpretations remain grounded in participants' lived realities rather than filtered through preconceived frameworks or professional biases.

RTA also requires recognising how emotions, culture, and perspective influence how stories are interpreted and how meaning is understood. To support this, I recorded reflections in post-interview field notes and during coding. Peer debriefing with supervisors

and consultation with the Māori expert advisor provided additional perspectives, helping to identify blind spots and supporting respectful interpretation of cultural and contextual nuances.

I identify as a non-Māori New Zealander and acknowledge that this positioning shaped my approach to this study of desistance. My motivation for undertaking this research stems from a commitment to understanding and giving voice to unique journeys with compassion, and from an interest in how people create meaning and change in their lives. As a Christian, I hold religion and spirituality to be personally significant, which contributes to my sensitivity to how belief systems, values, and existential frameworks may influence desistance for some individuals. This standpoint offers a unique lens while also requiring careful reflexivity to ensure that personal beliefs inform understanding rather than direct interpretation.

Working within a Kaupapa Māori-informed framework required humility, respect, and an openness to learning from Māori epistemologies and ethics. I received guidance and support from a Māori expert advisor, particularly during the study's design. This collaboration supported me in honouring Māori values, avoiding the reproduction of colonial power dynamics or deficit narratives, and working in a culturally safe way. By combining personal motivation, reflexive practice, and engagement with diverse worldviews, I aimed to produce analysis that is ethically grounded, culturally responsive, and attentive to the complex factors that shape desistance.

I entered this research assuming there was always a legitimate way to make ends meet; an assumption that, I came to realise, reflected an individualised view of responsibility. When Violet described committing fraud to get housing and provide for her children, I initially heard this as an excuse. Only on deeper reflection did I recognise that, within her circumstances, she experienced it as the only available option. This prompted me to examine whether I was reading her structural explanations more critically than I read similar accounts from other participants, and to consciously hold participants' own framings of their choices alongside my interpretation rather than judging them against my own assumptions.

Although I entered this research aware that desistance looks different for everyone, my interviewing did not always reflect this. When interviewing Russell, I asked him a leading question that invited him to speak on behalf of others' experiences. On reflection, this revealed an underlying assumption I had not consciously recognised — that formerly incarcerated people reintegrate in broadly similar ways. The data itself disproved this, and recognising the gap between my stated belief and the assumption embedded in my question sharpened my attention to the profound individual variation across participants, which became a key part of my analysis.

Finally, my own faith may have shaped what participants felt able to share. When interviewed, Russell appeared to soften his negative views on church; despite describing some genuinely difficult experiences, he summarised them as "they were good." Given that he also described himself as a people-pleaser who struggled to communicate honestly, it is possible he tempered his criticism because he knew I was a churchgoer and a Christian.

While I cannot know this for certain, it made me aware that my visible religious identity may have influenced how openly participants discussed faith and religion; a particularly important consideration given that religion was one of the domains this study explored. I therefore approached faith-related accounts with the possibility that they were shaped, in part, by my presence in mind.

One participant was known to me by reputation before the study, having spoken about his experiences at a community event, and was re-contacted through a personal connection after an initial referral lapsed. While no direct prior relationship existed, his experience in publicly narrating his story was relevant to interpretation: his account was likely more rehearsed and structured than those of other participants, and I remained attentive to both what his polished narrative revealed and what it might smooth over.

By explicitly acknowledging positionality and engaging in continual reflexive practice, I aimed to uphold ethical and interpretive integrity throughout the study. Reflexivity is thus not an isolated task but an integral part of every methodological decision, from data collection and analysis to the representation of participants' voices. This transparency enhances the study's trustworthiness, ensuring that findings authentically reflect participants' meanings while remaining critically self-aware of my role in their construction.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the philosophical, methodological, and ethical foundations of the study. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, it adopts a qualitative,

narrative-based design analysed through RTA. This approach acknowledges that desistance is a meaning-making process, best understood through the accounts of those who have moved away from offending. By focusing on how participants construct their own narratives of change, the study captures the complexity and individuality of desistance beyond quantitative measures of recidivism.

The research design incorporated unstructured life-story interviews, purposive sampling, and culturally responsive methods. Kaupapa Māori principles and the guidance of the Māori expert advisor informed the study's design and the treatment of participants' stories. Reflexivity is embedded throughout, guiding how data were gathered, interpreted, and represented, while strategies addressing credibility, dependability, and confirmability support analytic transparency and trustworthiness.

By situating participants' voices at the heart of the analysis, this study seeks to generate insights that are both theoretically significant and practically relevant. The following chapter will present the findings that emerge from this interpretive and reflexive process, illuminating what participants themselves identified as most important to their desistance and reintegration in Aotearoa.

Results

The analysis draws on interviews conducted with five participants who had diverse backgrounds, offending histories, and experiences of imprisonment and reintegration. To protect confidentiality, all participants are referred to using pseudonyms. Participant quotations are used throughout this chapter to illustrate and substantiate the themes

identified in the analysis. Where necessary, quotations have been trimmed for clarity and readability using ellipses, while preserving their original meaning. Interpretation in this chapter remains grounded in participants' accounts and focuses on explaining and interpreting the patterns evident in the data. Engagement with relevant literature and consideration of the wider theoretical implications of these findings are reserved for the discussion chapter.

Five themes were developed through the analysis. These are: Accountability in Context; The Carceral Paradox; The Relational Foundation; Becoming Someone New; and Meaningful Work. Together, these themes trace how participants understood their offending, navigated a system that often worked against them, drew on relationships to rebuild, reconstructed a sense of self, and found meaning in work.

Accountability in Context

Participants consistently took ownership of their offending while simultaneously recognising the external circumstances that shaped their decisions. Crucially, these circumstances were framed as influences rather than excuses. Across participants, responsibility for offending remained personal; structural and environmental factors were acknowledged as contributing conditions rather than as mechanisms for deflecting blame.

Clear examples of accountability emerged throughout the interviews. John stated simply that "I made the decision to do it," while Blyndside repeatedly attributed both his initial imprisonment and subsequent recalls to his own "poor decisions." Despite substantial differences in offences, backgrounds, and time in prison, participants

consistently understood their offending as the product of choices for which they remained personally accountable.

At the same time, participants did not deny the role of context. Rather than viewing agency and circumstance as competing explanations, they held both together. This relationship was particularly evident in the accounts of Mark and Blyndside. When asked what he believed was the main reason he initially went to prison, Mark was offered obvious external explanations: I raised his upbringing and the "wrong crowd" he associated with. Rather than taking these, Mark returned repeatedly to his own agency: "Just probably the choices I made... Upbringing would have played a little bit of a part of it... the people I was hanging around with, the drugs, money." Although he acknowledged the role of context, his upbringing, his associates and substance use, he consistently framed these as secondary, subordinate to the decisions he had made. His repeated return to "the choices I made," even when offered a ready external explanation, suggests an acceptance of responsibility that was internalised rather than merely rhetorical. Similarly, while Blyndside described his offending as the result of his own "poor decisions..." he also recognised that "there were things [that] contributed" to those decisions. In both cases, contextual influences were acknowledged without displacing personal responsibility.

Importantly, the direction of this relationship remained consistent across participants. Decisions were framed as primary, while external circumstances functioned as secondary contributors. None of the participants inverted this relationship by presenting circumstance as the principal cause and personal agency as incidental. This distinction is significant because it suggests that participants' accounts were not attempts to excuse

offending behaviour. Rather, they reflected an understanding that decisions are made within social contexts that shape opportunities, constraints, and vulnerabilities, while still recognising personal responsibility for the choices ultimately made.

For some participants, accountability extended beyond acknowledging the role of context to actively understanding and avoiding the contexts that had previously contributed to offending. This was most evident in Blyndside's account. Reflecting on his release, he described deliberately distancing himself from people and situations associated with his past offending, explaining that "I wanted to stay away from all the people that I knew in my past" and that he wanted to avoid "bad company and enemies." He also reflected on the risks posed by certain living environments, explaining that he was "finished with shared accommodation, living with other men," where the presence of others' "drug addictions" and "mental health problems" meant "to avoid confrontation is very difficult, to avoid theft and assault is very difficult." He expressed relief at being "out of those environments." Crucially, Blyndside treated the choice of environment as itself within his control, removing himself from settings he judged high-risk rather than positioning himself as their passive victim. In this sense, his accountability was not only retrospective, involving ownership of past decisions, but also forward-looking and agentic: it extended to actively shaping the contexts he occupied to sustain change. This agency was, of course, dependent on his having the option to leave such environments, a capacity not equally available to all. Accountability therefore functioned not simply as an explanation of past behaviour but as an ongoing, practical strategy for maintaining change.

Blyndside repeatedly construed his recalls and lapses as "setbacks," a frame he returned to throughout his account; "I was creating myself setbacks"; "things... that would always create setbacks for myself." This language is revealing: a setback presupposes a forward journey, positioning his lapses as deviations from a path to which he remained committed rather than as failures or proof of a fixed criminal identity. Notably, he paired this with both ownership, "I was creating myself setbacks..." and a learning orientation, identifying the patterns he needed to address "or else it's just going to keep creating setbacks." This framing reflects what the desistance literature terms a redemption rather than condemnation script, in which past lapses are interpreted as part of an ongoing, improvable journey toward change, a forward orientation revisited in the construction of a future self.

This pattern raises the question of whether expressions of accountability were shaped by prolonged exposure to correctional systems. Demonstrations of remorse and personal responsibility are often central to progression through prison and parole processes, potentially reinforcing particular ways of talking about offending and change. This possibility is particularly relevant for participants such as John, Mark, and Blyndside, who spent significant periods navigating these systems. However, the consistency with which participants accepted responsibility, even when discussing difficult personal histories and adverse circumstances, suggests that accountability was not purely a strategic performance. Notably, both Mark and Blyndside declined opportunities to attribute their offending primarily to external factors, despite acknowledging the role those factors played in shaping their lives.

John's account illustrates a more complex form of accountability. Although he stated that "I made the decision to do it," he simultaneously challenged aspects of how his actions were interpreted and sanctioned. He maintained that his original conviction should have been manslaughter rather than murder and disputed the legitimacy of his recall, which he attributed to false accusations. Consequently, John accepted responsibility for his initial actions while contesting the legal and institutional interpretations that followed. His account demonstrates that accepting responsibility for offending does not necessarily require accepting every aspect of the criminal justice response to that offending.

Violet's account reflected the same underlying acceptance of responsibility but framed accountability through a distinct moral and spiritual lens. She opened her interview by stating, "I was dishonest," a sentiment she returned to repeatedly throughout her narrative. Unlike other participants, who primarily discussed accountability in terms of decision-making and offending behaviour, Violet interpreted her actions through a faith-based framework. She framed her imprisonment explicitly as divine punishment, "that's the punishment of me... from God. Dishonest, that's my punishment. It's going to prison..." and understood it as a lesson: "God didn't leave me there long. Just a lesson he took me there for... then I opened my eyes." While the language differed, the underlying pattern remained consistent with the wider theme: responsibility was accepted rather than displaced. Her account, therefore, illustrates an alternative framework for understanding accountability, grounded in religious meaning rather than in secular concepts of choice and responsibility.

Across these narratives, accountability emerged not simply as the acknowledgement of past wrongdoing but as a foundation for desistance. Participants consistently owned their decisions, while recognising the conditions that shaped them, and for some, this understanding extended into actively avoiding the contexts that had once led to offending. In this sense, taking responsibility was not only a way of explaining the past but a means of orienting toward a different future. While participants accepted responsibility for their offending, they were equally clear that the structural conditions shaping their pathways did not end at sentencing. The same system tasked with facilitating rehabilitation was frequently described as creating conditions that made desistance more difficult.

The Carceral Paradox

Participants described a system that did not merely fail to support desistance but actively generated obstacles to it: a dynamic this theme terms the carceral paradox. The paradox operates through the architecture of incarceration, by which this theme refers not to the physical structures of prison but to the organisational systems and institutional logics that shape how imprisonment operates, including parole processes, release procedures, rehabilitation provision, and the underlying logics of risk management and control that govern how the system responds to those within it. Participants' accounts suggest that imprisonment can erode trust, disrupt a sense of belonging, and leave individuals inadequately supported upon release. Rather than merely failing to support desistance, the system was often perceived as actively generating obstacles that made successful reintegration more difficult; a dynamic this theme terms the carceral paradox.

This theme encompasses several interconnected ideas: that prison can provide a sense of belonging or surrogate family; that the system obstructs or fails to provide support at release; that access to opportunities depends on navigating institutional relationships rather than assessed need; and that rehabilitation programmes are often under-resourced, ineffective, or, in some cases, criminogenic.

A foundational idea emerging from participants' accounts was that prison could function as a surrogate family and source of belonging. Mark reflected that, "I felt accepted. I think, uh... the jail was, like, family." This sense of belonging was particularly significant given his description of a fractured family environment outside prison. Elsewhere, Mark stated that he felt "protected, loved, cared for," suggesting that prison provided forms of emotional support and acceptance that had often been absent in his life prior to incarceration. Similarly, Russell stated, "So there's a lot less judgement, judgement, a lot more understanding." For both participants, prison offered acceptance and social connection that they struggled to find elsewhere. These accounts suggest that prison could, at times, feel safer and more socially supportive than life outside its walls.

Violet's account further reinforced this pattern. Reflecting on her time in prison, she described positive relationships with other women, involvement in church, access to work, and opportunities to engage in activities that were largely absent from her life outside prison. As she explained, "I didn't do much like that at home." Her account suggests that imprisonment sometimes functioned as a form of respite from difficult social circumstances, providing structure, routine, and connection that had previously been lacking.

Belonging remained central to Blyndside's wider narrative. Although he did not find belonging in prison, he identified the search for acceptance from others and a place where he felt he belonged as a key factor in his offending. Reflecting on his adolescence, he explained: "I guess for everybody, once they hit their teenage years in high school, they try and find their place of belonging, their identity. And for myself, I was influenced by, I guess, neighbourhood gangs." His search for belonging became intertwined with antisocial peer groups and substance use, contributing to his offending pathway. This suggests that the desire for belonging was not unique to those who found connection within prison, but was a broader theme underpinning both offending and desistance trajectories.

Collectively, these accounts point toward a paradox. For individuals whose lives outside prison were characterised by fractured relationships, poverty, or social exclusion, incarceration could partially meet needs that had previously gone unmet, raising questions about its function as a deterrent. As Russell reflected, 'it's a bit easier in prison sometimes.'

Blyndside's experience stood in contrast to this pattern, and also reflected a shift in his own relationship to belonging. Whereas he had once sought acceptance through gangs, by this point he had turned away from such connections, choosing isolation over the forms of belonging available to him. He rejected the notion that prison provided belonging or family, explaining, "because I felt like I wanted to do that on my own, I didn't reach out for family support, and I didn't feel that I could connect with gangs. So I did that on my own in prison, which wasn't easy to do." He further stated, "I'm in an institution where the truth isn't easy to come by and trust... I could never, ever trust anybody." These comments

portray prison not as a source of belonging, but as an environment characterised by isolation and distrust.

More fundamentally, these findings suggest a process of institutionalisation. If prison becomes a place where individuals feel accepted, understood, and cared for, while simultaneously experiencing instability, exclusion, or loneliness in the community, adaptation to institutional life may become easier than adaptation to freedom. The paradox was therefore not simply that prison provided a sense of belonging while functioning as punishment. Rather, prison appeared to provide a sense of belonging largely confined to the institution itself, while simultaneously eroding the trust necessary to establish belonging beyond it. Consequently, the very environment that met participants' immediate needs for connection could also make it more difficult to achieve the forms of connection required for long-term desistance.

Participants' accounts also indicated what leaving these forms of belonging required. Mark described the severance directly, "I had to cut everyone off. Yeah, all my mates were mongrel mob. Just cutting them off was hard," adding that he had since remained on one side of the harbour bridge. Blyndside similarly described wanting to "stay away from all the people that I knew in my past," and Russell explained that he had "distanced myself from anybody in prison."

Notably, this severance was not accompanied by a loss of attachment. Mark explained that during rehabilitation, "if you thought about your past, then you'd start missing it. You had to try, just block it out," describing active suppression rather than

settled feeling. Russell, reflecting on having to cut off those he knew inside, questioned his own decision: “sometimes I think if I should have done that because you know, they could have been a support at the moment.” For both, distance was maintained despite continuing value rather than because that value had faded.

This ongoing management was visible in how participants weighed opportunities to give back. Mark was offered a role mentoring others through the driver licensing programme that had itself expanded his own employment prospects, but explained: “I didn’t want to deal with guys from prison.” This is notable given that he actively sought other generative roles, volunteering at the Op shop and describing that work in terms of contribution and purpose. His earlier characterisation of prison as somewhere that “sort of become, like, home,” where “you learn the code... pretty quick,” suggests why such a return might be experienced as risky rather than simply generative. Russell resolved the same tension in the opposite direction, accompanying a prison ministry into Springhill to speak with people still inside. Blyndside described a third approach. Living at Grace Foundation, an agency he characterised as “the only agency that are taking on gang members and higher risk offender,” he was encouraged to speak to other residents about his experiences. He acknowledged discomfort in doing so, noting that he did not like speaking in front of people, “especially gang members,” but explained that he had done it more than once and that “that was just my only way I could give back.”

As explored in Theme 3, participants consistently identified supportive relationships as central to sustaining desistance. Yet participants' accounts suggest imprisonment may undermine one of the key foundations on which such relationships depend: trust. The

implication is significant: if prison erodes trust, then reintegration requires not only forming new relationships but first rebuilding the capacity that the system has damaged. This makes the relational work of desistance, explored in the following theme, both more essential and more difficult.

Another way in which the architecture of incarceration was perceived as undermining desistance was through post-release obstruction and inadequate support. John described people being released “with nowhere to go” and argued that Corrections effectively “wash their hands of people” once they leave prison. He maintained that “They need to be accountable for people once released.” In contrast, when Russell was asked whether he felt he had been left “on his own,” he responded, “Nah, prison care ministries was... a wraparound service.” His account suggests that support was available, but often came from community-based organisations rather than statutory agencies.

Blyndside’s experiences further illustrate these barriers. He described multiple attempts to secure support and accommodation before release, explaining, “I had a bed, and they said no because they said that I need more structure around my release... I believe they wanted me to spend more time in prison.” He also stated, “I reached out to some community support. I did that a number of times... it didn't work out because the expectation of support that the parole board were looking for... was too much for me to achieve. So it was always declined.” The parole board's decision is revealing. Despite Blyndside having secured accommodation, his release was refused because he required “more structure”, prioritising continued containment over a concrete reintegration opportunity. This reflects a carceral logic in which risk management and control take

precedence over support, and in which uncertainty is met with further confinement rather than assistance. In this sense, the very logic governing release decisions can work against the reintegration that the system is ostensibly designed to facilitate.

The consequences of these barriers extended beyond delayed release. Blyndside described having to "navigate myself through the system," and reflected that his eventual release came not through meeting the board's requirements honestly, but through dishonesty. He described it as "a very tough battle to be released," which came about only through "not being open and honest with the parole board." This account suggests that after repeated unsuccessful attempts to secure release through approved channels, he felt compelled to present himself strategically rather than transparently. His experience highlights a tension within the system: while honesty and accountability are formally encouraged, participants sometimes perceived institutional requirements as creating incentives for impression management rather than openness. The implication is that progression may become linked not to complete honesty but to demonstrating the attitudes, narratives, and presentations expected by decision-makers. In this sense, the system may inadvertently teach that strategic self-presentation is more effective than transparency, undermining the very honesty and accountability that rehabilitation and desistance are intended to foster.

As evident across narratives, access to support appeared to depend not only on assessed need but also on an individual's ability to navigate institutional relationships. A recurring theme throughout John's account was the idea that a good rapport equated to good reports and greater access to opportunities. He repeatedly described knowing how to

“work the system,” positioning himself advantageously by building relationships with key decision-makers and by understanding what they wanted to hear. While this reflects a form of institutional competence, it also suggests that progression may be influenced by an individual's capacity for strategic self-presentation rather than assessed need alone. This, in turn, complicates the interpretation of John's interview, as his account was produced within a system that appeared to reward particular narratives and presentations of self. Rather than assuming his responses were inauthentic, this finding highlights how correctional environments may incentivise impression management, where demonstrating the attitudes and narratives expected by authorities becomes an important means of accessing opportunities and progressing through the system.

This same dynamic extended to accessing specific opportunities within the prison system. Discussing Release To Work (RTW), a programme that participants frequently identified as one of the most constructive opportunities available in prison, Mark remarked that it requires “a bit of brown tonguing to get there.” This is a crude expression of ingratiating flattery; it implies insincerity, suggesting the system rewards impression management over genuine need, and privileges those willing to perform compliance over those most in need of support.

A further finding within this theme concerned participants' perceptions that rehabilitation was under-resourced, ineffective, and, in some cases, harmful or counterproductive. When asked whether he had engaged with rehabilitation programmes in prison, Mark responded, “There is no rehabilitation in prison...they don't work. They don't

have the resources.” His account demonstrates a broader scepticism regarding the capacity of prison programmes to facilitate meaningful change.

Participants' experiences of rehabilitation were mixed, varying both across individuals and within single accounts. John was the most critical, arguing that some programmes, the Straight Thinking and Violence Prevention Unit programmes, may have made participants "more criminologically orientated," reinforcing rather than reducing criminal thinking. Yet his account was not wholly negative: he also identified Release to Work and the Medium Intensity Rehabilitation Programme as beneficial to his eventual release. Russell and Blyndside spoke more favourably overall, with Russell describing RTW as "really awesome" and prison programmes as "pretty positive." Blyndside echoed this, valuing programmes as "a huge benefit... which enable me to develop some skills that would help me to adjust back out [in the community]," while also recognising their limits: "for guys like myself, long-term offenders, programs are good. But they can only take you so far."

Participants' experiences, therefore, suggest that rehabilitation programmes were neither uniformly effective nor ineffective. For some individuals, they were perceived as valuable and transformative, while for others, they were viewed as ineffective or even harmful. Importantly, participants often attributed these differences less to the programmes themselves and more to individual readiness for change. As John explained, "you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink," referring to the idea that prison programmes "won't work unless the individual wants to change." At the same time, he emphasised the importance of programme facilitators, stating that "no matter how good

the individual or the programs, if you do not get on with facilitators, they can stand in your way,” and that “good instructors are important.”

These accounts point toward a broader finding. Across participants, the perceived success of rehabilitation was influenced not only by programme content but also by interpersonal relationships and individual motivation. Consistent with the wider pattern throughout this study, relationships appeared to play a more significant role than programmes alone. While this theme has focused on the barriers created by the system itself, the following theme turns to what participants identified as supporting desistance: the relationships at the foundation of their efforts to change.

The Relational Foundation

Across participants, successful reintegration appeared to depend less on the content of programmes and services than on the quality of the relationships through which support was delivered. Relationships were not merely one helpful factor among many; rather, they emerged as the foundation upon which desistance was built. Even formal interventions were often described as succeeding or failing according to the nature of the relationship between participants and those delivering support. This theme, therefore, extends beyond describing supportive relationships to illustrate how recognition, trust, belonging, and social connection formed the relational foundation of desistance. Collectively, these findings resonate with the desistance literature's descriptions of the relational and socially recognised dimensions of desistance, concepts further developed in the discussion chapter.

Relational quality emerged as more influential than the content of programmes or services themselves. Participants consistently suggested that support was experienced as effective, not because of what was offered, but because of who offered it and how those relationships were experienced. Reflecting on the support he received, Russell described Seth, Jack, and June as “really a positive influence.” He characterised Prison Care Ministries as “really like a wraparound service,” noting that “Seth always rung us.” Russell also recalled being invited to a barbecue where they “treated us... like normal people. They weren't stand-offish.” These experiences were contrasted with a negative encounter in a church setting, where he stated, “I sort of felt like I'd been attacked, 'cause it was in [front of] the whole congregation.” Significantly, both experiences occurred within a religious context, yet they produced very different outcomes. This suggests that participants did not find religion itself supportive, but rather the quality of the relationships they experienced within those settings. The same broad environment generated opposite experiences because the relational dynamics differed. Faith as a resource for desistance in its own right is examined later in this theme; here, Russell's experience serves only to illustrate that it was relational quality, not the setting, that shaped whether support was experienced as helpful.

John's account similarly emphasised the importance of relationships. Reflecting on prison-based rehabilitation programmes, he argued that “no matter how good the individual or the programs, if you did not get on with facilitators, they can stand in your way,” adding that “good instructors are important.” Given that John reported both positive and negative experiences with prison programmes, his perspective is particularly

instructive. Rather than attributing programme effectiveness solely to programme content, he identified the relationship with facilitators as the factor that ultimately determined whether an intervention was experienced as helpful or obstructive.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that participants evaluated support more in terms of relational quality than programme content. Respect, consistency, and genuine care appeared to shape whether interventions were experienced as supportive or obstructive. This finding suggests that relationships were not simply vehicles through which rehabilitation was delivered but constituted an active mechanism of change in their own right.

As established, the carceral environment left participants deeply distrustful. Against this backdrop, the trust they placed in certain individuals becomes particularly significant. Importantly, this trust was not given freely but earned through consistent and demonstrated action over time. In Theme 2, Blyndside described prison as having instilled a profound sense of distrust. This distrust initially extended to Seth, with Blyndside recalling that he had “no confidence at all” in him. The turning point came during Blyndside’s struggles following release, when he began to witness Seth’s support in practice. Thinking about this shift, he explained that trust developed only when he “...saw the support that he was offering.” Rather than emerging through promises or formal obligations, trust was built through observable actions that demonstrated reliability and genuine concern.

The ongoing development of this trust is evident in Blyndside's account of Seth's continued support. Recounting these experiences, he explained that "...when I was recalled, he took my cars. Twice, he had taken my cars to his home and taken care of it, but a 3rd time he said, no..." The first two occasions demonstrate how repeated actions helped establish trust and reliability. Equally important, Seth's refusal the third time illustrates the presence of boundaries within the relationship. His support was not unconditional or enabling, but rather reflected a genuine investment in Blyndside's wellbeing. This suggests that the relationship was valued not simply because Seth was useful, but because he had demonstrated consistent care and integrity over time.

Blyndside's account illustrates the capacity of genuine relationships to overcome one of the most damaging consequences of imprisonment: entrenched distrust of others. The development of trust in this case was neither immediate nor automatic; rather, it emerged through repeated interactions and sustained commitment. This finding highlights both the importance and difficulty of forming meaningful relationships following imprisonment. If prison undermines an individual's capacity to trust, successful reintegration becomes dependent on rebuilding that trust through relationships characterised by consistency, authenticity, and accountability. Yet these qualities often require significant time to develop and are not easily cultivated within systems typically structured around surveillance, risk management, and short-term interventions. The trust Blyndside rebuilt in Seth, after prison had eroded his capacity to trust, reflects a process of relational repair. This resonates with what the desistance literature terms tertiary desistance, in which sustained change depends not only on internal identity change but

also on external recognition and acceptance by others. The significance of these relationships is explored further in the discussion.

Faith functioned primarily as a relational rather than doctrinal resource. Participants described faith less as adherence to religious belief than as relationships with God and with faith communities that provided meaning, forgiveness, belonging, and hope. As Russell's account demonstrated, the effectiveness of faith-based support depended less on religion itself than on the quality of the relationships through which it was experienced. This was most clearly shown by participants whose faith supported them despite little or no institutional religious involvement, suggesting that the relationship, not the religion, mattered.

When asked whether faith mattered more through church support or a personal relationship with God, Mark identified both, "the support and trying to have a personal relationship with God..." while emphasising he was "more leaning towards a relationship with God." Similarly, Violet described her faith in relational terms, explaining that "God is looking after me there." For both, faith was experienced not as doctrine but as an ongoing, personal relationship that provided care, forgiveness, and reassurance.

Faith also operated through supportive social networks. Reflecting on her release, Violet described how "when I first came out of prison, [I] meet my church families, they coming to our house," and how "my church, they support us that time... they give us support." Notably, her involvement was reciprocal rather than one-directional; "I have few duties at church..." suggesting the church offered not only support but a place to contribute

and belong. A similar pattern emerged for Mark, who identified church support as one of the two dimensions of his faith. Although he spoke less expansively about it than Violet, his valuing of "the support" alongside his relationship with God, together with his continued participation across congregations, his volunteering, and his sense that he "seemed to fit in," suggests the church provided belonging, structure, and prosocial connection.

Blyndside's account is particularly revealing because it isolates the relational dimension entirely from the institutional one. His faith was personal and informal: he described himself as "a huge prayer" who put "[things] down to life or God, God's interaction," while openly acknowledging "I don't know the Bible or anything." Unlike Violet and Mark, his faith was detached from organised religion, doctrine, and church participation, yet it still provided a framework for understanding his experiences and maintaining hope. Because Blyndside's faith lacked any institutional scaffolding, his account most clearly demonstrates that it was the relationship, not the religion, that supported desistance.

Collectively, these accounts indicate that faith supported desistance relationally through a personal relationship with God or supportive faith communities, providing meaning, hope, belonging, and forgiveness. In doing so, faith served as a relational and identity-forming resource, helping participants construct a sense of self and purpose beyond their offending histories, a role this study revisits in examining how participants rebuilt their identities.

Support from people with lived experience of imprisonment appeared to possess a distinctive credibility. Participants suggested that shared experience fostered understanding, trust, and practical assistance that was difficult to replicate through professional support alone. While positive relational quality was important in general, support from individuals who had experienced imprisonment themselves appeared to carry a unique credibility and understanding.

Russell repeatedly referred to an individual named Jay, who had previously been incarcerated and played a significant role in helping him secure employment. Russell explicitly connected Jay's willingness to help with his own experience of imprisonment. He described arriving at a worksite with a broken arm, at risk of losing the work. Jay, who "had been to prison" himself, intervened on his behalf, speaking to the manager and finding Russell alternative work: "Can you paint?" Russell replied, "yeah, I'll give it a go," and remained employed, eventually securing the apprenticeship that became central to his reintegration. Jay's willingness to go beyond what was required suggests an awareness of the barriers faced by people with criminal records, shaped by his own lived experience of those challenges.

A similar pattern emerged in Mark's account. Reflecting on a particularly difficult period, he recalled, "And then I rung a peer support worker on a Friday from the Pak'nSave car park in Mount Wellington. And I... He picked me up Monday morning and brought me out to Dairy Flat." This peer-support worker reached Mark during what he described as a low point in his life and became an important turning point in his desistance journey. Mark reflected that "I think that was probably the first time I... started actually thinking about

God and church.” While faith would later become significant, it was another person's intervention that created the opportunity for that change.

In both cases, shared experience did more than foster empathy; it created credibility and access. Jay's own imprisonment gave him an understanding of Russell's situation that a professional might not have, and his standing in the workplace enabled him to advocate effectively on Russell's behalf. Support from those with lived experience, therefore, appeared to combine experiential credibility, trust grounded in shared history, with a form of social capital through which connections and standing could be mobilised to open opportunities otherwise closed to people with criminal records.

Importantly, participants who had benefited from such support often expressed a desire to provide it to others. Russell described returning to prison alongside others who provided support to incarcerated individuals, explaining, “I was just going with these guys... they go to talk to people inside. Like Springhill... they're pretty much trying to do what Seth done.” Similarly, Mark described volunteering with an organisation that had supported him, stating, “I work with them voluntarily at Salt Op shop.”

Blyndside also expressed a desire to give back to Seth, who had been instrumental in his desistance journey, “And this is my way of giving back to Seth.” More broadly, Russell observed that this motivation was common among those who had received support from Seth, stating, “Yeah, because everybody wanted to give back in their own little way.” Across participants, this desire to contribute appeared to be grounded in lived experience. Rather than distancing themselves from their pasts, participants often drew on those experiences

to support others. This suggests that participants' offending histories were not only reframed as part of their personal past but also became resources through which they could support others. This movement from receiving support to providing it is significant. By drawing on their own histories to help others, participants reframed their offending pasts not as liabilities to be left behind but as resources that gave their support particular value. In doing so, they began to occupy a different social role, one defined by contribution rather than offending, and to be recognised, by themselves and others, as people with something to offer. This shift from recipient to contributor reflects an emerging orientation towards generativity and social recognition, through which a prosocial identity could be claimed and affirmed.

If trusted relationships formed the relational foundation of reintegration, they did so by enabling participants to imagine and invest in different futures. Relationships, therefore, acted not only as sources of practical support but also as catalysts for identity reconstruction and future orientation, providing a bridge to the next theme.

Becoming Someone New

Desistance depends on constructing a future-oriented self, a vision of who one could become that present choices serve and protect. Incarceration actively dismantles this capacity, entrenching short-term thinking as a rational adaptation to the instability and ever-changing circumstances of prison life. Re-entry, therefore, requires actively rebuilding future orientation through concrete goals, motivation (both intrinsic and other-directed), and the gradual development of an identity worth protecting. This identity change, the shift from seeing oneself as an offender to envisioning and investing in a different future self,

reflects what the desistance literature terms secondary desistance: the identity change that underpins sustained desistance. This theme, therefore, concerns the temporal and identity dimension of desistance, distinct from the relational focus of Theme 3 and building on it.

Blyndside's account provides clear evidence of this dismantling of future-oriented thinking. Reflecting on his time in prison, he stated, "I only knew short-term gratification and short-term goals, because in prison, things are easily taken away from you really quickly." His account suggests that prison actively discouraged long-term planning by creating an environment characterised by instability and uncertainty. Under such conditions, short-term thinking became a rational adaptation to prison life. Rather than fostering the future orientation associated with desistance, incarceration appeared to reinforce a focus on immediate concerns and short-term rewards.

If incarceration undermined participants' capacity for future-oriented thinking, successful re-entry required actively rebuilding it. For Blyndside, this process began through reflection on a significant setback. Discussing his recall to prison, he explained, "But when I went back for those 2 more years... So I just really reflected on that and just thought, right, I need to make a difference. In that, by making sure I stay clear of things that I thought I wanted." He later reflected that, "So what I needed to do was go back to prison, which I did." Looking back, Blyndside viewed this setback as a turning point that forced him to reflect on his previous decisions, learn from them, and develop a renewed commitment to change.

For other participants, rebuilding a future-oriented perspective occurred through the establishment of concrete long-term goals. These goals provided direction, purpose, and something to work towards. When asked what had contributed most to staying out of prison, Russell responded, "I really wanted a family, and I really wanted to work. Yeah, I just wanted to be that husband, work, come home, you know, footy in the weekends, a good league or something like that." His account suggests that desistance was supported by a clear vision of the future he wanted to build. A similar pattern emerged in John's account. He purchased a run-down yacht with the intention of restoring it, describing the project as something that "[It] kept me off the streets." The project provided a long-term focus, while also representing a potential future career. John further emphasised the importance of setting realistic long-term goals. Together, these accounts suggest that future-oriented goals provided participants with both purpose and direction, helping to structure their lives around desired future outcomes rather than immediate gratification. More than practical planning, these goals reflected the construction of a new prosocial identity, what the desistance literature describes as cognitive transformation, whereby individuals envision and begin to inhabit a conventional 'replacement self.' Russell's vision of becoming a husband and worker, and John's investment in a future career, were not merely activities but images of the people they were becoming.

While John and Russell rebuilt future orientation through concrete goals, Mark's motivation was primarily other-directed. He described a turning point when he was homeless and sleeping in a car park, reflecting that "it wasn't looking good for me, and I thought my dog deserved better." His children were also central to this process. When

asked what helped him stop using substances, he identified “my kids” as a key factor, alongside gaining custody of his son. For Mark, future orientation was grounded less in personal aspirations than in a desire to fulfil responsibilities and create a better life for those who depended on him.

Violet's rebuilding was rooted in faith. Her belief that "God already forgave me" meant she did not view herself as permanently defined by her offence, providing hope that a different future remained possible. Although she did not frame her future through explicit long-term goals, her faith offered a framework for reinterpreting her past, not as a fixed identity but as part of a moral journey toward renewal. This reflects what the desistance literature describes as a redemption narrative, in which faith provides a ready-made structure for reframing the past and envisioning a future self-redeemed.

Beyond the identities implied by their goals, several participants also described more explicit work on character and relational patterns. For Russell, this involved an ongoing tension between past expectations of aggression and a developing sense of alternative responses. He explained: “I'm expected sometimes to be violent, but then once they push the boundary, and they seen that I wasn't, they feel like I'm a pushover. And that's sort of escalated, and sometimes I don't know what to do. Like, I've blown my lid a few times, but... actually sorting it out properly, like going through that procedure, I don't really know how to do that...” This account illustrates the practical difficulty of shifting entrenched behavioural scripts, particularly when non-violence is misread as weakness. While Russell clearly identifies a desire to respond differently, the extract also shows that

this remains an active and unfinished process of adjustment rather than a completed transformation.

Russell also explicitly located change in relational learning and modelling. When reflecting on what had helped him most, he noted, "It's more looking at mentors like Seth. My previous employer, the one I've got now... my friend that helped.... You know, and a lot of people have stuffed them over. They've...just kept on going...and they haven't used violence or anything like that." Here, desistance-oriented behaviour is not described as an internalised principle in isolation, but as something observed, learned, and gradually adopted through sustained exposure to pro-social others. Mentors and significant relationships, therefore, function as behavioural reference points, providing alternative scripts for responding to conflict and stress.

A similar but distinct process is evident in Blyndside's account, where character change is framed less around anger or violence and more around autonomy and patience. He came to recognise that "I was doing things on my own, which I didn't realise you just cannot do", a pattern of self-reliance that "created anxiety" and led him to "move too far ahead" without knowing "how to take my time." In this sense, his narrative highlights a shift from hyper-independence towards an acceptance of interdependence, patience, and paced decision-making. Importantly, this change was gradual rather than immediate; reflecting on his adjustment to independent living, he noted "it's come at a time where I'm ready to be on my own," indicating that readiness itself is constructed over time through experience.

In sum, these accounts suggest that character reconstruction reflects the deeper identity work the desistance literature associates with cognitive transformation, the reinterpretation of past patterns and the gradual construction of a new prosocial self. Yet this was not simply an individual cognitive shift. Both Russell and Blyndside explicitly linked their development to mentors and significant others, underscoring that changes in identity were supported, and often made possible, through relational contexts. In this sense, the construction of a future-oriented self was both a cognitive and a relational achievement, secondary desistance enabled through the tertiary, relational foundations established in the previous theme.

Regardless of motivation, constructing a future self is core to desistance, especially to counteract the dismantling of this that occurs in prison. For Russell and John, this came through setting goals and working towards them. Mark's motivation was other-directed, while Violet's was based on hope, which comes from her faith. These rebuildings are more than just goals; they point to the kind of person each participant was trying to become. Russell wants to be a husband who provides for his family; Mark wants to get custody and be a present father; and Blyndside, in his resolve, shows that he wants to steer clear of his past life. Violet's identity centres on her religion, as she is forgiven for her past and walks forward with a blank slate. These all speak to a deeper identity (re)construction occurring beneath the surface. In reframing their pasts and articulating who they were becoming; a provider, a father, a forgiven person, someone removed from an old life, participants were authoring what the desistance literature terms redemption narratives: accounts that reinterpret a criminal past as the starting point for a changed and prosocial self. This

identity work lies at the heart of secondary desistance, the shift in self-concept that sustains long-term change. Among the goals and anchors through which participants built this future self, employment recurred with particular force; though its value, as the next theme shows, lay well beyond the economic.

Meaningful Work

Employment supports desistance not solely through income but multiple simultaneous mechanisms, providing structure, prosocial identity, routine, relationships, and future orientation. Crucially, not all work serves these functions equally: meaningful work that offers dignity and purpose supports identity reconstruction, while demeaning work may do little or even undermine it. The defining argument is that the quality and function of work, not merely its presence, determine its value for desistance. This resonates with a key qualification in the desistance literature: while employment can act as a turning point that embeds individuals in conventional life, its protective effect depends on job quality, personal readiness, and freedom from stigma rather than on employment alone. The accounts that follow support this qualified view, showing that work supported desistance only when it offered purpose and dignity.

For the participants in this study, employment in itself did not support desistance; it was work that offered purpose and dignity. Demeaning or purposeless work did little, or even undermined desistance. Russell demonstrates this idea clearly as he stated, “I find it hard just working for nothing...but if I had a purpose, like I had a partner, I was working for us...” This suggests it is less the job itself than whether it serves a purpose. In the absence of having a family to work towards, Russell still finds a purpose in his work, “And yeah, I

knew my apprenticeship was gonna come, so I'm trying to... I thinking of trying to get my own crew." Similarly, for Violet, work served a purpose, "I know working is helping my family... So they need my help. So that's why I'm working."

Blyndside had a different goal, but again, employment was more than just work. He had a very strong desire for financial stability. He stated, "I felt a financial, I needed to be- financial stability was important. So I started to work straight away." Similar to Russell and Violet, employment supported Blyndside's desistance journey when it served a purpose, as it felt fulfilling and meaningful. In each case, work functioned as more than a source of income; by providing purpose and a stake in conventional life, it operated as the kind of turning point and social bond the desistance literature associates with sustained change, and, for some, as a "hook for change" that supported the construction of a new prosocial identity.

Mark illustrates both sides of the same coin. Work perceived as degrading or demeaning could undermine desistance, as reflected in Mark's description of "a peasant job..." a phrase conveying how little dignity he found in the work Work and Income New Zealand directed him toward. This connects with Russell, who described how hard it was to "work for nothing." However, when Mark was asked about employment at a different point in the interview, he stated, "Yep... Doing positive.... Thinking positive, meeting good people." He also directly said, "Yeah, give me a purpose, and I'm good at landscaping." Talking about employment was also the first time he said anything positive about himself. Mark exemplifies this contrast: the same person, two kinds of work, two very different responses. This highlights that employment alone is not sufficient. There is a nuance to it.

Employment that supports desistance must be perceived as purposeful and must not be demeaning or degrading.

RTW was a valued bridge between prison and employment, but access was neither straightforward nor equal. Many participants spoke very highly of RTW. Russell described it as “really awesome.” Blyndside also engaged with RTW, where he met Seth. John was an engineer before going into prison, and RTW meant he could continue this work while incarcerated. Based on these participants’ stories, RTW provided a structured transition into work that was genuinely valued by all three.

However, access to RTW was neither needs-based nor straightforward. Mark described progression into RTW as requiring individuals to work their way “from the bottom up,” and when the possibility that advancement depended on ingratiation was raised, he rejected it: “No, thank you.” Mark’s own access was disrupted by behavioural issues and prison transfers rather than any unwillingness to ingratiate himself. Nonetheless, as established in Theme 2, access and progression within the system often depended on an individual’s ability to navigate institutional expectations rather than on need alone. Consequently, although three participants valued RTW, access to it was neither guaranteed nor equally available.

Employment often depended not only on motivation or the availability of opportunities, but also on access to practical enablers that made work possible. Across participants, these barriers were frequently addressed through the assistance of trusted individuals and support organisations. Mark’s experience provides a clear example. Many

forms of employment in New Zealand require a driver's licence. With CCT's support, Mark obtained several licences, explaining, "Yeah, I got a few licenses through here." (Here refers to CCT, as the interview was held at its offices.) He later confirmed that these qualifications directly improved his employment opportunities, stating, "Yeah, I was working the Penlink over out Weiti way, when I got out of rehab." His account illustrates how a driver's licence functioned as a practical gateway to employment. Without it, certain forms of work were inaccessible; with it, opportunities became available.

Importantly, Mark attributed this support not simply to an organisation, but to specific individuals within it. Reflecting on Chris' central role in helping him obtain his licences, he stated, "He was the force behind it all." Consistent with the broader findings of this study, practical support was often experienced through trusted relationships rather than solely through services. In this case, access to employment was facilitated through a non-statutory organisation and its members, reinforcing the importance of relationships in enabling successful reintegration.

A similar pattern appeared in Blyndside's account. As he described, Seth, a non-statutory individual and his key source of support, offered help "to acquire equipment for my employment..." another instance of a practical barrier to work being removed through a trusted relationship.

More broadly, Mark's account highlights the significance of practical barriers that are often overlooked in discussions of desistance and reintegration. Discussions of employment frequently focus on motivation, willingness to work, and job availability.

However, participants' experiences suggest that employment may remain inaccessible even when these factors are present if key practical prerequisites are missing. In Mark's case, obtaining a driver's licence was not merely an additional qualification but a necessary condition for accessing employment opportunities. This finding suggests that successful reintegration depended not only on individual change and supportive relationships but also on access to practical resources that enabled participants to translate motivation into tangible opportunities. Whereas the desistance literature has emphasised job quality, readiness, and stigma as conditions shaping employment's protective effect, the role of concrete practical prerequisites, such as a driver's licence, has received comparatively little attention. These findings suggest that such enablers represent an underexplored but important dimension of how employment supports desistance: without them, work may remain inaccessible regardless of motivation, readiness, or available opportunities.

A criminal record was frequently described as a source of stigma that could obstruct access to both employment and housing. However, participants navigated this barrier in different ways, and their experiences suggest that outcomes depended partly on circumstances beyond their direct control. John identified stigma as a significant challenge when seeking both work and accommodation, describing these as difficult to obtain following imprisonment. While he did not explicitly attribute every barrier he encountered to stigma alone, his account suggests that a criminal record functioned as an additional obstacle independent of an individual's readiness or willingness to reintegrate. In this way, access to employment and housing was influenced not only by personal effort but also by

how others responded to an individual's past. This reflects what the desistance literature describes through labelling theory: the criminal record operates as a stigmatising label that can obstruct reintegration independently of an individual's actual readiness or change, reducing the person to their offending history in the eyes of employers and others.

One strategy participants identified for navigating this barrier was self-employment. John suggested that owning a business reduced exposure to employer-based stigma because no employer was making decisions based on a criminal record. Mark's experience points in a similar direction. Alongside other forms of employment, he undertook private landscaping work. When asked whether a criminal record made employment more difficult, he agreed that it did. Although he did not explicitly connect this challenge to his self-employment, working for himself may have helped him reduce exposure to the discrimination he acknowledged.

Russell's account, however, highlights the limitations of this strategy. Reflecting on the construction industry, he explained that "...like in the building... your reputation should be good otherwise... the bosses will just say, oh, no, we're not going to give you this opportunity and that opportunity." His comments suggest that even when individuals avoid traditional employment structures, stigma can persist through reputation and informal networks. Consequently, self-employment may reduce some barriers associated with a criminal record, but it does not necessarily eliminate them.

In contrast to the experiences described by John and Mark, Violet encountered more favourable circumstances. Before returning to work, she anticipated being stigmatised

because of her conviction, stating that “...they won’t accept me... they won’t trust me.” However, her expectations were not realised. Instead, “they called me and said they keep my job.” While this outcome may have been influenced by the fact that her employer knew her before her imprisonment and expected her absence to be relatively short, it nevertheless demonstrates how different circumstances can produce very different reintegration experiences.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that stigma associated with a criminal record constituted a significant barrier to employment and housing. Participants adopted different strategies to navigate this barrier, including self-employment, while some benefited from more favourable circumstances than others. Importantly, the variation in participants’ experiences indicates that successful reintegration was not determined solely by motivation, effort, or readiness to change. Outcomes were also shaped by factors beyond participants’ control, including employer perceptions, existing relationships, reputation, and the opportunities available to them following release. This underscores that desistance is not solely an individual achievement: the same stigma could be decisive for one person and immaterial for another, depending on circumstances such as a prior relationship with an employer. Such variation highlights the structural and relational conditions that shape whether individual change can translate into reintegration, a dimension the desistance literature has noted is often underplayed.

In summary, employment supported desistance, but not through the mere presence of work alone. What mattered was whether employment provided purpose, structure, dignity, and opportunities to construct a future-oriented identity. Access to such

employment was itself shaped by practical enablers, stigma, relationships, and circumstances that were not always within participants' control.

More broadly, the interviews suggest that desistance was not simply a matter of individual choice, motivation, or willpower. While participants consistently took ownership of their offending, their accounts also revealed how pathways into and out of crime were shaped by relationships, institutional experiences, practical opportunities, and circumstances beyond their direct control. The same system tasked with supporting rehabilitation was frequently described as producing barriers to desistance. In contrast, the support participants found most valuable often came through trusted individuals and non-statutory sources. Across themes, relationships emerged as the foundation for trust, belonging, accountability, support, and opportunities for change. Collectively, these findings suggest that desistance was relational, gradual, and shaped by both individual agency and the wider social conditions within which participants attempted to rebuild their lives. The implications of these findings, and their relationship to existing understandings of desistance, are explored in the following chapter.

Discussion

This study explored what formerly incarcerated individuals in Aotearoa identified as significantly contributing to their sustained desistance. The findings suggest that the key was relationships underpinning domains, such as employment, faith, or housing, and the support these relationships provided. Across participants, sustained desistance was made possible through trusted relationships, the reconstruction of identity and future

orientation, and the navigation of structural conditions that often worked against change. Simultaneously, participants described a carceral system that often produced the very conditions that undermined desistance, providing a sense of belonging and structure while eroding trust, future orientation, and opportunities for reintegration.

The findings in the current study spoke to a tension within the desistance literature: the tendency to try and explain desistance by emphasising either individual agency or structural factors. The accounts presented here suggest that this opposition is largely artificial and may be used to simplify a very complex and multi-faceted issue. Participants consistently accepted responsibility for their offending, reconstructed identities, and worked towards futures they valued. Simultaneously, participants did not ignore context, recognising that these efforts were neither independent nor self-sustaining. Rather, they were enabled, constrained, and given meaning through relationships and institutional contexts. Trusted relationships fostered the recognition, accountability, and hope that supported change, while structural barriers, including those created by the justice system itself, frequently obstructed reintegration. Therefore, desistance is best understood as an achievement of agency, but not agency alone. Instead, it emerged through the dynamic interaction of personal agency, relational support, and structural conditions.

This chapter develops these findings through four arguments. Firstly, it considers how participants negotiated a changed identity, rather than simply achieving it. It argues that desistance involves an ongoing process of identity reconstruction rather than the adoption of a completed redemption narrative. Secondly, it examines how relationships are central to this process, demonstrating that trust, recognition, and social connection

formed the relational foundation upon which desistance was built, including how these findings resonate with Kaupapa Māori understandings of relational and collective wellbeing. Next, the ways in which the criminal justice system frequently produced obstacles to reintegration, including the carceral paradox, will be discussed. Finally, the relative importance of the domains through which desistance has traditionally been understood, including in this study's own framing, will be considered, reflecting on what an open, participants-centred inquiry reveals.

Argument 1: Negotiating Accountability and Identity: Beyond Redemption as a Completed Achievement

Maruna's (2001) distinction between condemnation and redemption scripts has become one of the most influential frameworks for understanding desistance outcomes. Redemption narratives involve an individual reconstructing their pasts in ways that allow them to view themselves as capable of change and to develop identities oriented towards prosocial futures (Maruna, 2001). Yet, as Maruna and King (2009) argue, these narratives develop within societies that often continue to define people by their offending past. This creates a tension between personal transformation and public stigmatisation. The findings of this study support this multi-dimensional understanding of desistance (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1993). They also suggest a refinement. Rather than a linear progression from condemnation to redemption, participants engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating responsibility, context, and systemic limitations, in which identity change was neither complete nor solely their own to achieve.

Accountability as the Integration of Agency and Context

One of the clearest findings was that participants consistently accepted responsibility for their offending while simultaneously acknowledging the circumstances that shaped their decisions. Mark attributed his imprisonment to “the choices I made” while recognising that his upbringing “played a little bit of a part” in those decisions. Similarly, Blyndside accepted that he made “poor decisions” while noting that “there were things that contributed” to them. Context did not excuse actions, nor did personal responsibility erase context. Accountability appeared to be strengthened, not weakened, by situational awareness. This sits awkwardly with attributional accounts that treat behaviour as either dispositional or situational (Cullen et al., 1985; Heider, 1958), and with the assumption embedded in much desistance writing that recognising structural constraint diminishes personal responsibility.

Changeability, Responsibility, and Identity Reconstruction

This integrated understanding also speaks to broader debates about whether people see human behaviour as fixed or changeable. When the belief is that behaviour, and therefore people, are changeable, rehabilitation and redemption are more often viewed as the goal and appropriate response (Dweck et al., 1995; Hoyt et al., 2024; Malle, 2022). Participants reflected a similar orientation: past offending was interpreted not as evidence of a fixed criminal identity but as recognition of decisions that could be understood, learned from, and changed. Blyndside’s framing of his recalls as “setbacks” is illustrative. It positions his offending as lapses and part of an ongoing, improvable process rather than as evidence of an unchangeable self.

Importantly, this does not weaken accountability; rather, it shows that accountability and changeability are mutually reinforcing, not contradictory. Participants treated responsibility as something owned rather than as a permanent feature of identity, which allowed them to accept it without being defined by it. This is consistent with accounts of desistance as gradual and revisable rather than as a decisive break (Giordano et al., 2002), and confirms that pattern among people who had sustained desistance for at least four years in Aotearoa.

Redemption and Identity Reconstruction as Negotiated and Incomplete

Although participants' accounts contained elements of Maruna's (2001) redemption scripts, they did not reflect the clean or resolved version of redemption often implied in literature; desistance was described as ongoing, revisable, and sometimes unstable. Blyndside's account illustrates this well as he described desistance as involving "setbacks," adjustments, and sustained effort rather than a single transformative shift. John's account also illustrates this: while he accepted responsibility for his actions, he also challenged the legal interpretation of those actions and the legitimacy of his subsequent imprisonment.

This incompleteness was not only narrative: participants did not describe themselves as fundamentally transformed individuals who had made a clean break from their past selves. Instead, they described ongoing work on aspects of themselves that remained challenging: Russell reflected on continuing to manage his temperament, and Blyndside on managing anxiety, long after offending had ceased. Change, in these accounts, was not an accomplished state but a process still underway.

These accounts do not reject redemption narratives so much as complicate them: redemption emerges as a negotiated process in which individuals continuously reinterpret their past in light of present circumstances and future aspirations. This resonates with Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation, which conceptualises desistance as gradual rather than a singular moment of conversion, and with secondary desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004), in which lasting change requires the sustaining of a new identity rather than simply the cessation of offending. Yet participants' accounts underscore something these models can understate: that such identity work is effortful and demands continual reinforcement, particularly where external validation of change is uncertain or inconsistent.

Social Recognition and the Persistence of Stigma

Importantly, identity reconstruction occurred within a broader social environment that did not always recognise or validate participants' changes. Maruna and King (2009) highlight the tension between belief in rehabilitation and enduring punitive attitudes towards people with criminal histories. Thus, secondary desistance depends not only on internal change but also on whether others recognise that change (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). Participants' accounts reflected this clearly. Russell described the persistence of reputations that continued to shape how he was perceived long after offending had ceased. At the same time, John's account showed the assumptions attached to a criminal record operating independently of anything he had subsequently done. Although both described meaningful personal change, they continued to be interpreted through the lens of past offending. Identity change was therefore not solely an internal process, but

something negotiated in relation to how others perceive them. This highlights an important extension of the earlier analysis: identity reconstruction is not only about how individuals understand themselves, but also about whether that identity is socially validated. Stigma therefore does not simply follow from offending history; it actively shapes the conditions under which desistance must be performed.

In aggregate, these findings suggest that desistance is not adequately captured by redemption and condemnation scripts alone. Instead, it involves a negotiated and relational process in which accountability, situational understanding, identity reconstruction, and social recognition are continuously intertwined. Participants did not reject responsibility, nor did they fully transcend their pasts through a stable redemptive narrative. Rather, they actively reconstructed identity while navigating structural constraints and persistent social judgements. This aligns with McNeill's (2016) concept of tertiary desistance and with Maruna and King's (2009) account of the tension between personal transformation and enduring public stigma.

Therefore, identity change is neither purely individual nor structural, but relational in nature. It emerges through the interaction between agency, recognition, and opportunity. This provides a direct bridge to the next section, which argues that trusted relationships were not simply supportive contexts, but the mechanism through which identity change was recognised and sustained. In this sense, relationships constitute the foundation through which tertiary desistance (McNeill, 2016) becomes possible.

Argument 2: Relationships as the Mechanism of Desistance: Recognition, Trust, and Social Connection

While the previous section argued that identity reconstruction was negotiated rather than complete, participants' accounts also demonstrated that this negotiation was rarely undertaken alone. Instead, desistance was fundamentally relational. The findings suggest that relationships were not merely supportive influences operating alongside other desistance factors, but the primary mechanism through which change was recognised, reinforced, and sustained. This resonates with McNeill's (2016) concept of tertiary desistance, which emphasises the importance of being recognised and accepted by others, as well as broader relational accounts of desistance that position change as emerging through social connection rather than individual effort (McNeill & Schinkel, 2024; McNeill & Weaver, 2010; Weaver, 2019). What the present findings add is confirmation of this pattern among people who had sustained desistance for at least four years in Aotearoa, a context in which relational accounts of change remain comparatively underexamined. The final argument in this chapter then considers what follows for how recognised desistance domains are understood.

Relationships as Active Mechanisms Rather than Supportive Contexts

Relationships were valued above the formal content of programmes or services. Russell's contrasting experiences with religion demonstrate this: only one became meaningful through the relationships he developed with a worker from a Christian prison ministry, while the other was alienating, marked by being publicly called out and humiliated at a church service. A similar emphasis appeared in Violet's account, where the value of

her church lay less in its religious activities than in the practical and emotional support of its community, “my church, they support us,” which continued after her release. In addition, when describing the effectiveness of prison programmes, John focused less on how facilitators delivered the programme than on whether individuals genuinely cared, invested in him, and treated him as a person rather than simply another offender.

This suggests that prosocial activities and programmes did not produce desistance in themselves; they became effective when they embedded participants within relationships characterised by trust, authenticity, and recognition. While the desistance literature increasingly emphasises the relational nature of change (McNeill & Weaver, 2010; Weaver, 2019), participants’ accounts point to something more specific: it was not participation in employment, faith, or rehabilitation as such that mattered, but the relational environments these created, environments that affirmed participants’ developing identities and made change meaningful.

Earned Trust, Recognition, and Tertiary Desistance

Trust was neither immediate nor unconditional, as the participants demonstrated. Instead, it was earned gradually through repeated demonstrations of reliability, consistency, and genuine care. Blyndside’s relationship with Seth illustrates this particularly clearly. Trust emerged not through encouragement alone, but through repeated experiences in which Seth demonstrated commitment while maintaining clear boundaries. His willingness to refuse Blyndside’s requests, when necessary, communicated genuine concern rather than enabling behaviour, allowing trust to develop through observable action rather than verbal reassurance.

This finding extends McNeill's (2016) concept of tertiary desistance. Recognition was not experienced as abstract social acceptance, but as something enacted through relationships in which participants came to believe they were genuinely seen as capable of change. Importantly, this process occurred against the backdrop of participants' earlier experiences of prison, where institutional practices and interpersonal uncertainty had frequently eroded trust. For Blyndside, this erosion was profound: he described an institution "where the truth isn't easy to come by," leaving him feeling he "could never, ever trust anybody." Notably, this distrust had tangible consequences for help-seeking; he "didn't reach out for family support" and was reluctant to accept help, attempting to manage his reintegration "on my own." Trust therefore required rebuilding not merely to enable recognition, but because its absence actively deterred participants from accessing the very relationships that could support their desistance. Rather than emerging automatically from release, tertiary desistance appeared to depend upon relational repair through specific, trustworthy individuals capable of demonstrating consistency over time. Recognition, in other words, was not a single event but a relational process through which changing identities gradually became believable, both to participants themselves and to those around them.

Lived Experience, Credibility, and Social Capital

Participants further distinguished between support offered by professionals and support offered by people with lived experience of imprisonment. Russell's description of Jay alongside Mark's reflections on peer workers suggests that shared experience carried a form of credibility that professional expertise alone could not easily replicate. Having "been

there” appeared to generate trust more quickly because participants believed their experiences were genuinely understood rather than interpreted from the outside. This is not to say that such trust was unavailable to professionals: Seth demonstrates that those without lived experience of imprisonment could still build trusted relationships. As noted above, however, this trust developed gradually and required repeated actions over a considerably longer period.

This finding is consistent with understandings of social capital, whereby relationships provide access to resources, opportunities, and networks that facilitate desistance (Farrall et al., 2010; Sampson & Laub, 2003; Weaver, 2019). However, the present findings suggest that lived experience contributed more than access alone. Shared experience created relational credibility, enabling advice, encouragement, and accountability to be interpreted as authentic rather than instructional. This credibility enabled participants to accept guidance from individuals who embodied the possibility of successful change, illustrating that social capital is not simply accumulated through networks but also depends on the quality, legitimacy, and trustworthiness of those relationships. This may also be understood in light of what participants described about imprisonment itself. As established above, prison was frequently described as eroding the capacity to trust, with Blyndside concluding that he “could never, ever trust anybody.” Where institutional experience has taught that outsiders cannot be relied upon, shared experience may function less as an additional advantage than as the one basis on which trust can be extended quickly. Seth’s case is instructive in this respect. Trust was possible without shared experience, but it had to be built against that inheritance rather than around

it, which may account for why it developed so much more slowly. Read this way, the credibility of lived experience is not simply a feature of peer support but a consequence of what imprisonment does to people's willingness to be helped.

Generativity and Becoming Contributors

Relationships were important not only because participants received support; they also became central as they increasingly sought to support others. Russell's desire to "do what Seth done," Mark's commitment to serving through the Op Shop, and Blyndside's wish to give back to Seth all reflected a movement from recipient to contributor. Participants' changing identities were therefore reinforced not only by receiving recognition, but also by becoming sources of recognition for others.

This finding reflects Maruna's (2001) concept of generativity, which was common in redemption narratives. Rather than viewing their offending histories as purely a source of shame, many participants sought to transform their past into a resource for helping others. Barry (2006) similarly argues that caring roles allow people to construct meaningful, prosocial identities. The present findings develop this work by suggesting that generativity also functioned as a mechanism of identity confirmation. Giving back did not merely express an established identity; it actively reinforced it through continued participation in prosocial relationships. Participants therefore sustained desistance not simply by leaving offending behind, but by occupying valued relational roles through which their transformed identities became visible and socially recognised.

Relational Desistance and Kaupapa Māori Understandings

The centrality of relationships within participants' accounts also resonates with Kaupapa Māori understandings of wellbeing and justice outlined in the literature review, which emphasise whānau, whakapapa, wairua, and collective wellbeing rather than purely individual change (Durie, 1998; Jackson, 1988; Workman, 2019). Read through this lens, desistance can be understood as a process of relational repair, the restoration of mana, and reconnection with community, rather than solely the cessation of offending (Jackson, 1988; Workman, 2019). This relational orientation also finds emerging empirical support in Aotearoa: Cliffe-Tautari (2024) found that whakapapa connections and whānau relationships were pivotal to rangatahi Māori moving away from offending, while Low (2025b) found that women's desistance was closely bound up with repairing and renegotiating relationships with their families of origin, even where those relationships had been sources of harm. While the present study was not conducted as a Kaupapa Māori inquiry, it was Kaupapa Māori-informed, with a Māori expert advisor guiding design, data collection, and interpretation, and the findings align with this broader relational orientation.

Blyndside's reflections on his limited connection with his Māori culture illustrate how cultural disconnection may also represent relational disconnection. Rather than simply reflecting a lack of cultural knowledge, his account suggests the absence of relationships through which cultural identity could be experienced and sustained. Where identity, belonging, and wellbeing are constituted through whakapapa and whānau, the loss of cultural connection is not a separate deficit but a further severance of the

relationships through which desistance is sustained. While this finding should be interpreted with caution given the sample's size and diversity, it highlights the potential importance of cultural belonging as another form of relational support and suggests that reconnection with culture may serve as an important relational resource within desistance (Cliffe-Tautari, 2024; Richards et al., 2020).

Collectively, these findings suggest that relationships were not simply supportive contexts surrounding desistance but the foundation upon which desistance was constructed. Through relationships, participants experienced recognition, rebuilt trust, accumulated social capital, developed opportunities for generativity, and, for some, reconnected with broader cultural identities. This extends existing relational accounts of desistance by suggesting that relationships are not merely another protective factor but the mechanism through which many other protective factors acquire meaning and effectiveness.

At the same time, participants' accounts raise an important question. If trusted relationships are the primary mechanism through which desistance is sustained, why were they so difficult to establish following imprisonment? The answer lies partly within the prison system itself. As the findings demonstrated, incarceration frequently undermined trust while rewarding strategic self-presentation and limiting opportunities for authentic relational connection. The following section therefore turns to the structural context of desistance, examining how the criminal justice system paradoxically produced many of the very barriers that participants subsequently had to overcome.

Argument 3: The structural Paradox of Desistance: How the Criminal Justice System Produces the Barriers it Seeks to Overcome

The previous argument demonstrated that relationships provided the mechanism through which identity change was recognised and sustained. However, participants' accounts also revealed that these relationships frequently had to be established despite, rather than because of, the criminal justice system. Across the findings, the system charged with supporting rehabilitation was repeatedly described as producing conditions that made desistance more difficult. Rather than simply failing to remove barriers, participants suggested that imprisonment and post-release supervision often created new ones.

This finding contributes to an aspect of desistance that has frequently been identified as underdeveloped in the literature: the structural conditions that shape sustained change (McNeill & Schinkel, 2024; McNeill & Weaver, 2010; Weaver, 2019). While desistance scholarship has increasingly recognised that change occurs within social and institutional contexts, participants' accounts suggest something stronger. The criminal justice system itself frequently generated the very obstacles participants subsequently had to overcome. Desistance therefore emerged not only through personal agency and supportive relationships but in resistance to institutional practices that undermined reintegration.

Belonging In and Belonging Out: The Carceral Paradox Reconsidered

The clearest illustration of this structural tension was described as the carceral paradox in the findings. Participants repeatedly described prison as providing belonging,

acceptance, routine, and care that had often been absent in their lives before imprisonment. Mark described prison as “family,” explaining that he felt “protected, loved, cared for.” Violet similarly described prison as providing community, routine, meaningful work, and healthy food that contrasted sharply with the instability she experienced outside. She spoke warmly of this time: “I missed my family, but I enjoy the time I was in,” describing games, shared activities, and time with other women that, as she noted, she “didn’t do much like that at home.” What her account reveals is not that prison was desirable, but that imprisonment gave her time, community, and care that her everyday life, shaped by poverty and constant demands of providing for her family, did not. In this sense, her experience echoes Michalsen's (2019) finding that incarceration can paradoxically function as respite for women whose lives outside are marked by instability and hardship. Russell likewise reflected that prison could be “a bit easier,” offering a predictability that life outside often lacked. He described the security of always knowing “you’ve got a place to stay and you’re going to get fed,” and observed that if “you perform a certain way... you pretty much guaranteed this will happen.” He also experienced prison as less isolating and less judgemental than life outside, noting that people in prison seemed to “understand you a bit more.”

Paradoxically, however, these same experiences often undermined desistance. Prison met participants’ relational needs within an institutional environment while simultaneously eroding the trust and autonomy needed to rebuild their lives outside. Blyndside’s description of prison as “an institution where the truth isn’t easy to come by” and his conclusion that he “could never, ever trust anybody” illustrates this tension clearly.

Blyndside's account locates this dynamic earlier still. Reflecting on adolescence as the period when young people "try and find their place of belonging, their identity," he describes being drawn to neighbourhood gangs partly because of their visible involvement in community activities and sport. The search for belonging was therefore implicated in his pathway into offending as well as in the difficulties he later faced in leaving it. Notably, Blyndside did not find belonging in prison. He explained that he "didn't feel that I could connect with gangs" and, alongside not reaching out to his family, served his sentence "on my own in prison, which wasn't easy to do." Whether this reflected refusal or a sense that such connection was not available to him is not clear from his account, and he did not describe gang affiliation with hostility. What is clear is that the withdrawal was general rather than specific, and that it coincided with the distrust and reluctance to seek support discussed above.

These accounts warrant interpretation rather than correction. Low (2025a) observes that although incarceration is generally detrimental to desistance, some narratives nonetheless reveal incidental and imperfect benefits, including the interruption of addiction, the provision of structure and routine, and respite from chaotic circumstances. Violet's account, discussed above, reflects this pattern closely. What participants described was, on their own terms, real, and dismissing it as institutionalisation would misrepresent both their experiences and its analytic significance.

Belonging That Cannot Travel: Severance as Ongoing Work

The significance of this lies in the conditions attached to that belonging. The acceptance Mark described was available only inside prison, and the code he learned held

value only there. Recognition of this kind cannot travel beyond the gate, because it depends on remaining part of the group that desistance requires a person to leave. This reframes the carceral paradox identified in the findings. The difficulty was not simply that prison offered belonging while also functioning as punishment. Rather, the belonging it offered could not be taken outside, so gaining it deepened an attachment that participants would later have to break.

It might be expected that leaving such an attachment would involve becoming disillusioned with it, and that this disillusionment would itself precipitate change. Participants' accounts did not support this. Instead, they left what mattered to them while it still mattered. Mark described having to suppress thoughts of his former life during rehabilitation, explaining that "if you thought about your past, then you'd start missing it," so he had to "just block it out." Russell, reflecting on having to cut off everyone he knew from prison, questioned his own decision, noting that those people "could have been a support at the moment." For both, distance was maintained through continued effort rather than through any loss of feeling. McNeill and Schinkel (2024) describe tertiary desistance as a matter of contested belonging rather than straightforward acceptance. Read this way, desistance involved giving up belonging as much as gaining it, and that giving up remained unfinished. Nugent and Schinkel (2016) similarly describe the isolation that can follow when a person stops offending, and Mills et al. (2022) note that moving away from a former lifestyle can produce loneliness severe enough to draw people back towards familiar networks. Participants' accounts are consistent with this, but suggest that such distancing is better understood as ongoing work than as a transition that is completed and left behind.

The clearest evidence of this ongoing work lay in what participants declined. Mark was offered a role mentoring others through the same driver licensing programme through which he had expanded his own employment prospects, but turned it down because he “didn’t want to deal with guys from prison.” This is significant because he actively sought other opportunities to contribute, volunteering at the Op Shop and describing work in terms of purpose and service. What he declined was not a generative role as such, but one that required returning to the relational world he had worked to leave. Russell resolved the same tension differently, accompanying a prison ministry into Springhill to speak with people still inside, though he had otherwise “distanced myself from anybody in prison.” Blyndside went further still. Living at Grace Foundation, which he described as “the only agency that are taking on gang members and higher risk offender,” he spoke publicly about his journey to other residents. He noted that he did not like speaking in front of people, “especially gang members,” but he did so anyway, explaining that “that was just my only way I could give back.”

Generativity is widely understood to support desisting identities (Barry, 2006; Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001), and these findings do not contradict that; rather, they qualify it. Each participant sought to contribute, but the relational cost of doing so varied considerably. For Mark, giving back through mentoring would have meant re-entering a world he had deliberately left, and he declined it while contributing elsewhere. For Russell it meant a bounded return he could leave again. For Blyndside, whose accommodation was itself situated within that world, contribution and proximity were not separable. This suggests that opportunities to give back are not equally available to everyone, and that

their accessibility depends less on individual willingness than on the relational distance a person has had to establish and the circumstances, including housing, in which they are attempting to maintain that distance.

Taken together, these findings imply how alternatives to imprisonment might be designed. Low (2025a) suggests that any alternative system would want to reproduce or improve on the incidental benefits that prison sometimes provides. Participants' accounts complicate this. Where those benefits include acceptance that is only available within a criminalised community, reproducing them risks recreating the attachment rather than resolving it. What participants needed was not belonging in itself, which prison had already supplied, but belonging that could be carried beyond the place it came from. This corresponds closely to what Mills and Webb (2022) describe as social rehabilitation, drawing on McNeill and Graham (2020): the informal social recognition and acceptance of the returning citizen. Mills and Webb argue that this form of rehabilitation is largely neglected in Aotearoa, where provision remains dominated by individual, personal rehabilitation, and conclude that current approaches will remain undermined until it is addressed. Participants' accounts lend support to that conclusion from the perspective of those subject to the system.

These dynamics are perhaps better understood as features of the system rather than failures within it. Simon's (1993) description of imprisonment as a "waste management" model is particularly useful here. If incarceration primarily functions to contain and manage rather than reintegrate, then the production of institutional dependence, distrust, and social disconnection becomes less an unintended

consequence than an outcome consistent with its underlying logic. Mills and Webb (2022) make a related argument about Aotearoa specifically, contending that rehabilitation here is dominated by deficit-focused, cognitive-behavioural and needs-based models that locate offending in individual pathology. They argue that culturally responsive programmes have grafted Māori culture and tikanga onto these individualistic approaches rather than addressing the structural factors, including the legacies of colonisation, that shape reoffending among Māori. Where rehabilitation is understood in these terms, the relational and structural conditions participants identified as central to their desistance fall outside what the system is designed to address. Participants' accounts therefore suggest that institutionalisation is not simply adaptation to prison routines, but adaptation to social environments that become increasingly difficult to translate into community life.

Strategic Self-Presentation and the Institutional Production of Dishonesty

Participants also described institutional environments that rewarded strategic self-presentation over authentic engagement. John repeatedly reflected on the importance of “working the system,” building rapport with decision-makers, and understanding what authority figures wanted to hear. Mark similarly rejected what he described as “brown tonguing,” while Blyndside reflected on feeling compelled to present himself strategically to progress.

Rather than dismissing these accounts as evidence of participant manipulation, they are more productively understood as revealing the incentive structures embedded within correctional systems. Where progression depends on favourable reports, programme completion, and positive assessments, participants learn that advancement

often hinges on demonstrating the behaviours expected by institutional authorities. Consequently, honesty may become secondary to presenting the version of oneself most likely to secure progression.

This finding extends the structural critique beyond questions of programme availability or resource limitations. Participants' accounts suggest that correctional systems may inadvertently reward impression management over transparency, creating incentives for strategic compliance rather than authentic self-reflection. This is particularly paradoxical because desistance is commonly understood to require honesty, accountability, and identity reconstruction, yet participants perceived that institutional success often depended on carefully managing appearances. In attempting to assess rehabilitation, the system may therefore unintentionally cultivate the very performative behaviours it seeks to distinguish from genuine change.

Outsourcing Reintegration to the Community Sector

Participants' accounts revealed a consistent gap between statutory correctional services and the support needed to sustain reintegration. John was particularly critical of the statutory system, describing how the Department of Corrections would “wash their hands” of people once released and were “not accountable for people once released.” For John, meaningful support was not proactively provided by the state; where he received help, it came through personal relationships rather than correctional services.

Other participants echoed this pattern, but with an important difference: they actively sought and found support through non-statutory organisations. Blyndside, Mark,

and Russell described community and faith-based organisations; Prison Care Ministries, Grace Foundation, CCT, and individual mentors such as Seth as central to their reintegration. Crucially, this support was not systematically provided; it had to be sought out and accessed.

This points to a structural feature of reintegration in this context: statutory services did not proactively provide the relational support that participants identified as most important, leaving reintegration dependent on individuals' ability to locate and access non-statutory alternatives.

These accounts reflect a documented feature of reintegration provision rather than an oddity of participants' experiences. Mills et al. (2022) report that accommodation and support services comprised under 3% of the Department of Corrections' 2019 budget for rehabilitative and reintegration activity, and that while provision has increased and diversified, it remains patchy, fragmented, and difficult to navigate. In their sample, fewer than a third of participants received any support to find housing after release, while over half reported needing help they did not receive. Notably, the organisations Mills and colleagues identify as providing housing and support outside statutory provision, including Prison Care Ministries and the Grace Foundation, are among those participants in the present study named as central to their reintegration. Mills and colleagues characterise such organisations as emphasising relationship-building with residents. Hence, they feel genuinely part of a community, while operating with little or no government funding and remaining vulnerable to collapse without it. Participants' accounts therefore describe less an absence of provision than a distribution of it: the relationship support they valued most

existed, but sat outside the agency formally charged with reintegration and depended on organisations whose own position was insecure. Those who could navigate that landscape found support; those who could not encountered the gap John described.

Stigma, Labelling, and the Persistence of Structural Exclusion

Participants also demonstrated that structural barriers continued well beyond release through the enduring consequences of criminal records and public stigma. John described his criminal record as an ongoing obstacle to employment, while Russell reflected on the persistence of reputational judgements despite significant personal change. In contrast, Violet's experience highlighted the importance of circumstances: because her employer retained her position during imprisonment, she was able to return immediately to stable employment upon release.

These findings closely align with labelling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951; Tannenbaum, 1938), which argues that societal responses to offending can reinforce exclusion beyond the original offence itself. They also reflect Pager's (2003) demonstration that criminal records function as enduring structural barriers to legitimate employment regardless of subsequent behaviour. In the Aotearoa context, Low (2024) similarly found that women, and Māori women in particular, faced employment barriers arising from multiple intersecting sites of inequality rather than from criminal record alone.

Importantly, participants' accounts suggest that these barriers were neither universal nor entirely predictable. Outcomes frequently depended upon circumstances beyond participants' control, including employer discretion, pre-existing relationships, and

opportunities available at the point of release. Desistance, therefore, remains contingent not only upon individual commitment but also upon whether structural institutions allow that commitment to translate into meaningful opportunities. In this sense, stigma became institutionalised through employment systems, organisational policies, and risk management practices that continued to define individuals through their offending histories long after their identities had begun to change.

Situating These Findings Within the Aotearoa Context

Although the present study was not designed to examine the structural consequences of colonisation directly, these findings should also be understood within the wider context of Aotearoa's criminal justice system. Māori remain significantly overrepresented throughout the prison population, reflecting longstanding structural inequalities associated with colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and systemic disadvantage (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Deckert, 2020; Jackson, 1988; Tauri, 2013; Workman, 2019). This overrepresentation is not incidental to the structural argument discussed above. Where the criminal justice system produces conditions that obstruct desistance, those conditions are borne disproportionately by Māori.

As discussed above, Mills and Webb (2022) argue that rehabilitative practice in Aotearoa remains dominated by individualistic models that do not address the structural conditions shaping offending among Māori. The findings of the present study are consistent with this. The forms of support participants identified as decisive; relational continuity, recognition, and practical assistance, were largely supplied outside statutory provision, while the programmes the system did provide addressed cognition and risk. For Māori

participants, this gap compounds an overrepresentation that is itself a product of the structural conditions those programmes leave untouched.

In summary, these findings suggest that desistance is structurally conditioned in ways that extend beyond individual motivation or programme participation. Participants were required to rebuild trust after imprisonment had undermined it, demonstrate authenticity within systems that rewarded strategic self-presentation, rely upon community organisations where statutory support was limited, and negotiate enduring stigma embedded within employment and institutional practices. The criminal justice system therefore emerged not simply as a backdrop to desistance but as an active producer of many of the barriers participants subsequently had to overcome.

This reframes desistance as more than an individual journey of change. It is also a negotiation with institutional structures that can either facilitate or constrain opportunities for reintegration. Consequently, the significance of employment, housing, faith, and other recognised desistance factors cannot be understood in isolation from the structural contexts within which they operate. The following section therefore examines these domains directly, arguing that their importance lies less in their independent effects than in the quality of the opportunities and relationships they make possible.

Argument 4: Beyond Desistance Domains: Relationships, Meaning, and Opportunity as the Active Ingredients in Change

This study began with a framework commonly used in desistance research to examine the contributions of domains such as employment, housing, faith, physical activity, and mental health to sustained desistance. However, participants' accounts

ultimately challenged the assumptions that these domains operate as discrete contributors to change. In doing so, they speak directly to the question left open at the close of the literature review: whether these domains operate independently, or only through the relationships in which they are embedded. Participants' accounts pointed clearly towards the latter, with the importance of each domain lying less in its presence than in the relationships, meaning, dignity, and opportunities it created. Employment mattered because it fostered purpose and social contribution; faith mattered because it provided trusted relationships and a sense of belonging and hope; housing mattered because it enabled stability from which other aspects of life could be rebuilt. Across domains, participants consistently described the quality and function of these experiences as more influential than the domains themselves.

This provides a refinement to existing desistance literature. Research has often examined employment, housing, religion, physical activity, and other domains individually, implicitly encouraging comparisons over which factor matters most. Recent work has begun to move away from this framing. Low (2024), for example, found that employment supported desistance among predominantly Māori women in Aotearoa through its contribution to identity and relational desistance, rather than through income or occupational status alone. The present findings support that reading and suggest it holds more broadly, extending across faith, programmes, and housing as well as employment. Rather than functioning independently, they appeared to operate through shared relational and psychological mechanisms that fostered a sense of belonging, purpose, identity, and opportunity. In this sample, at least, the domains appeared to matter primarily through

their relational dimensions, suggesting that relationships may function less as one domain among several than as the foundation on which the others depend.

The Quality of Opportunities Matters More than their Presence

Participants consistently demonstrated that simply possessing a recognised desistance resource was insufficient. What mattered was the quality of the opportunities those resources provided and the identities they enabled participants to develop. This was particularly evident within the participants' employment experiences. Mark's reflections illustrate that employment was not valued simply because it generated income. Rather, he distinguished between work that merely occupied his time and work that provided purpose, responsibility, and opportunities to contribute to others. Likewise, participants' discussions of faith centred less on doctrine than on acceptance, accountability, and supportive relationships. Across these domains, participants were not simply seeking employment, religion, or programmes; they were seeking opportunities to become valued members of communities.

These findings speak to existing work on employment as a turning point (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen, 2000) and to Giordano et al.'s (2002) concept of "hooks for change". They align most closely, however, with Low's (2024) study of women with histories of imprisonment in Aotearoa, which found that employment contributed to desistance through identity and relational change, and which identified employers themselves as significant actors in that process. Mark's distinction between work that merely occupied his time and work that conferred responsibility and the capacity to contribute reflects the same pattern, as does Violet's account of returning immediately to employment because

her employer had retained her position during imprisonment. The present findings therefore confirm Low's account in a mixed-gender sample of people who had sustained desistance for at least four years, and extend it beyond employment: faith, programmes, and housing operated through comparable relational mechanisms. Rather than functioning as turning points in themselves, recognised domains became influential by enabling participants to experience purpose, dignity, belonging, and recognition.

Rethinking the Prominence of Exercise Within Desistance Research

A rather unexpected finding concerned physical activity. Despite exercise receiving increasing attention within desistance research, it rarely emerged spontaneously within participants' narratives. Instead, it arose only after direct prompting during interviews. Even where participants acknowledged exercise as beneficial, it was seldom described as central to their desistance journey in the way relationships, trust, or meaningful work were.

This finding should not be interpreted as suggesting that exercise is unimportant. Rather, it supports recent arguments that physical activity represents a selective rather than universal pathway into desistance (Ugelvik et al., 2025). Existing research has demonstrated that exercise can promote routine, emotional regulation, identity reconstruction, and self-discipline (Meek & Lewis, 2014a; Nelson et al., 2006), yet these benefits may not be equally relevant across all populations. Taylor's (2008) work similarly demonstrates that women's desistance narratives more commonly centre upon relationships, caregiving, and family responsibilities, while Meek and Lewis (2014b) document the distinct barriers women in prison face in accessing sport and physical activity.

This methodological point extends further. Much of the research demonstrating the benefits of physical activity for desistance has been designed specifically to examine it, recruiting participants through sports programmes, studying prison-based exercise interventions, or asking directly about physical activity (Meek & Lewis, 2014a; Nelson et al., 2006). Studies structured around a particular domain will, unsurprisingly, tend to find that domain significant. The present study, which did not foreground exercise, found it arose only when prompted. This is not to suggest that its documented effects are illusory; rather, it highlights that the apparent prominence of any given domain within the desistance literature may be shaped as much by research design as by participants' lived priorities. Just as studies built around exercise tend to foreground it, the present study's framing will have shaped which domains emerged in participants' accounts. This reflexive caution applies to the present research as much as the literature it draws upon. This suggests that remaining attentive to what participants themselves foreground may be as important as measuring the domains the literature has established.

Mental Health

Mental health followed a similar pattern, appearing throughout participants' accounts but rarely as a discrete domain. Rather than describing mental health support as a separate contributor to desistance, participants tended to experience it through the same relational and identity-based processes discussed above. Blyndside's efforts to manage anxiety, for instance, were linked with his broader work of reconstructing an autonomous, patient sense of self. At the same time, Mark's recovery from substance use was sustained less through formal treatment than through faith, family, and the responsibilities he had

taken on. This reinforces the broader argument that recognised domains rarely operated independently; mental health, like employment or faith, mattered through the relationships, meaning, and identity work within which it was embedded.

Housing as a Foundation Rather than an Ongoing Concern

Perhaps the most unexpected finding concerned housing, which occupied a less prominent place within participants' narratives than anticipated. This absence is striking given the weight that housing carries in the desistance literature, where it is frequently identified as one of the most significant contributors to sustained change. Bradley et al. (2001, p. 1) describe it as "the lynchpin that holds the reintegration process together." Yet, unlike relationships or employment, stable accommodation was rarely discussed as a continuing contributor to participants' desistance. This finding should be interpreted cautiously, however. Participants were purposively recruited at least four years after release precisely to capture accounts of sustained desistance, positioning them well beyond the immediate housing crises that frequently characterise early reintegration. Viewed this way, the relative absence of housing from their accounts may reflect not its diminished importance but its settled presence; for those whose desistance has endured, stable accommodation may have receded into the taken-for-granted background of life rather than remaining a live concern.

This interpretation aligns with recent Aotearoa research that distinguishes between having accommodation and having a home. Low et al. (2025) argue that people leaving prison require more than shelter: they need housing that carries psycho-social benefits capable of supporting wellbeing and ontological security. Read through this distinction,

participants' relative silence regarding housing may indicate not that it mattered little, but that its psycho-social functions had been secured. Stable accommodation often serves as a prerequisite for engagement in employment, relationships, treatment, and community participation, and its importance may therefore be most visible in its absence (Baldry et al., 2006). Like other forms of infrastructure, it is noticed primarily when it fails.

Blyndside's account illustrates this. He described being "grateful for the space that I've been given," which allowed him "to be able to go and work, come back, a place to sleep, prepare myself for work the next day, to get myself ahead." Here, stable accommodation functioned as the secure base from which the rhythms of everyday life could be sustained, reflecting the psycho-social conditions Low et al. (2025) identify rather than shelter alone. Notably, Blyndside described this space while explaining why he had spoken publicly about his experiences, suggesting that its value lay partly in what it enabled him to offer others. Bradley et al.'s (2001) characterisation of housing as the lynchpin of reintegration captures its structural necessity, while Blyndside's account suggests that what mattered was not accommodation as such but what it made possible.

This reading also has the advantage of explaining the pattern rather than merely noting it. Mills et al. (2025) found that people in stable housing six months after release were substantially less likely to be reimprisoned within the first year than those in unstable housing. However, the associations between housing and re-sentencing were weaker, and the study could not establish causation. Participants in the present study were recruited at least four years post-release, placing them well beyond the period in which these effects are most pronounced. The fact that housing had receded from their accounts is therefore

consistent with, rather than contrary to, the weight the Aotearoa literature places upon it. What may distinguish sustained desistance is not the absence of housing concerns but their resolution.

Practical Enablers as an Overlooked Dimension of Desistance

One of the more novel findings concerned the practical resources required to translate motivation into opportunity. Participants described seemingly ordinary resources, including driver's licences, work equipment, and transport, as pivotal to accessing employment and participating in community life. For Mark, obtaining a driver's licence through community support significantly expanded his employment opportunities. Likewise, Blyndside described the importance of practical assistance, including work equipment provided through support relationships, in enabling him to pursue legitimate employment. In both cases, these resources were foundational to participants' ability to translate motivation into action.

These accounts suggest that practical enablers warrant closer attention in accounts of sustained desistance, where they are more often treated as concerns of early reintegration. Much of the existing literature has understandably focused on employment, stigma, or motivation. Yet, participants' accounts indicate that these broader factors may remain inaccessible without the practical means to engage with them. Consequently, practical supports may be a relatively modest but important mechanism for reducing structural barriers.

When considered with the preceding arguments, this suggests that desistance is not best understood through a checklist of protective factors. It emerges from the interaction among negotiated identity, supportive relationships, and structural opportunities that enable people to participate in meaningful social roles. This answers the central research question of this study: the most important contributors to sustained desistance were not discrete domains operating independently, but the relationships, recognition, opportunities, and sense of purpose that cut across them.

Implications

If desistance is relational, structurally conditioned, and shaped by the quality and function of support rather than by discrete domains alone, then policy and practice should shift accordingly, from individual-level, programme-focused, risk-management approaches toward relational, structurally informed models of support (McNeill & Weaver, 2010). Across participants, programmes, churches, employment, and mentoring were valued primarily for fostering trusted, authentic relationships that provided encouragement, accountability, recognition, and practical assistance. Conversely, where relationships were absent or characterised by surveillance, conditionality, or institutional distrust, interventions were frequently experienced as far less meaningful.

These findings suggest that correctional and reintegration policy should place greater emphasis on relational continuity rather than programme delivery alone. Investment should extend beyond increasing availability of programmes to ensuring that individuals have sustained access to consistent, trusted relationships before, during, and after release. This includes recognising and adequately resourcing the relational work

undertaken by community organisations, peer mentors, faith communities, and lived-experience practitioners, whose contributions participants repeatedly identified as central to their desistance journeys. Rather than evaluating services primarily through programme completion or compliance measures, greater attention should be paid to the quality, continuity, and authenticity of the relationships those services facilitate.

Participants' most influential reintegration support came predominantly from community and voluntary organisations rather than statutory correctional services. This raises a question about where responsibility for reintegration lies. If the relational support that sustains desistance is largely provided outside government systems, there may be value in either strengthening statutory services' capacity to provide such support or more formally recognising and supporting the role of community organisations. Mills et al. (2022) report that expenditure on reintegration comprises a small fraction of the correctional rehabilitation budget, and that several organisations providing post-release housing and support in Aotearoa operate with little or no government funding. The reliance participants described therefore rests on provision that is itself insecure.

A further implication concerns the provision of practical enablers that allow individuals to convert motivation into meaningful opportunities. Even where individuals were motivated to change, they sometimes lacked the practical resources necessary to act on that motivation: Mark's driver's licence, obtained through CCT, substantially expanded his employment opportunities, while Blyndside's work equipment, provided through Seth, enabled him to pursue legitimate employment. These findings suggest that reintegration

services should treat practical supports as core components of reintegration rather than incidental extras.

Compared with broader structural reforms, such practical supports are often low-cost, concrete, and achievable interventions that can remove immediate barriers to accessing employment and other opportunities. Importantly, however, they complemented rather than replaced the relational supports discussed throughout this thesis. In both cases, the resources were accessed through trusted relationships, suggesting that practical assistance is most effective when embedded within supportive relationships rather than delivered as isolated material aid.

Statutory reintegration services could therefore strengthen their support by incorporating practical enablers alongside relational interventions, rather than relying on community organisations to meet these fundamental needs. While drawn from a small number of participants, these accounts suggest that practical enablers warrant closer attention in accounts of sustained desistance, where they are more often treated as concerns of early reintegration.

A final implication concerns broader societal perceptions of the capacity for change among formerly incarcerated individuals. As the preceding arguments showed, participants demonstrated sustained efforts to reconstruct their identities and establish prosocial lives, yet continued to encounter the assumption that a criminal past permanently defines a person. Such barriers extend beyond practical disadvantage. They deny individuals the social recognition that supports the maintenance of a new identity,

reinforcing the importance of tertiary desistance and recognition by others in sustaining change (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2016).

If desistance depends not only on personal transformation but also on recognition from others, then reducing stigma and promoting more nuanced understandings of desistance represent important components of successful reintegration. Public education initiatives, employer engagement, and efforts to challenge assumptions about the permanence of a criminal identity may all help create conditions in which desistance is more likely to be recognised and sustained. This study cannot determine which of these approaches is more effective, but it adds to a growing body of evidence that change is both possible and observable (Burton et al., 2020; Maruna & King, 2009).

Limitations

The study drew on interviews with five participants. The sample size is consistent with RTA, which prioritises depth of interpretative engagement over breadth and does not treat saturation as a marker of quality (Braun & Clarke, 2021b); the intention was rich, contextually grounded understanding rather than statistical generalisation. The sample's composition nonetheless constrains the analysis in specific ways. With four men and one woman, the gendered dimensions of desistance identified in the literature could not be meaningfully explored. While participants' Māori, Pasifika, and Pākehā backgrounds enriched the accounts, the sample was too small to support within-group cultural analysis. The findings are therefore best understood as offering transferable insights whose resonance with other contexts readers are positioned to judge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), supported by the thick description provided throughout (Geertz, 1973).

Relatedly, the quality of RTA depends less on sample size than on the researcher's sustained engagement with the data, through which meaning is actively generated rather than extracted (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021b). This principle cuts both ways: while it supports the adequacy of a small sample, it also means analytic depth is reliant on time. Delays in scheduling interviews compressed the period available for this iterative work, and additional time to engage with the data may have supported richer, more fully developed themes.

By design, this study focused on individuals who had remained crime-free for at least four years to examine durable rather than early desistance. This scope shaped which factors were most prominent in participants' accounts: the acute challenges of early reintegration, most notably housing instability, featured less prominently, as participants had largely moved beyond that phase. The findings therefore speak to the maintenance of long-term desistance rather than the immediate post-release period, and the relative absence of certain factors reflects this focus, not their unimportance. Conversely, this focus offered a vantage point that early-reintegration studies cannot: insight into which supports remain salient once desistance is established. Furthermore, participants' accounts of the post-release period were retrospective, reconstructed through the lens of their subsequent success; consistent with the narrative approach adopted here, these accounts are treated as meaningful constructions rather than literal records of that period.

A further limitation concerns the research process itself. Like most desistance research, this study was conducted *on* rather than *with* people who had experienced imprisonment. The life-story interview format was chosen partly to redistribute control

within the research encounter: participants determined what to share, which experiences to foreground, and how to structure their own narratives, rather than responding to a rigid researcher-imposed interview structure. A Māori expert advisor also provided cultural guidance throughout, strengthening the study's cultural safety. Nonetheless, this control extended only to the telling; decisions regarding research questions, interview design, thematic analysis, and interpretation ultimately remained the researcher's responsibility, and the study was not designed as a participatory or co-produced authorship. Consequently, while participants' voices were prioritised through extensive direct quotation and a predominantly inductive analytical approach, both the domains explored in the interviews and the framing of participants' narratives inevitably reflect the researcher's interpretive lens.

Future Research

The present study's scope and design suggest several directions for future research. Most directly, its cross-sectional design, drawing on participants who had already sustained desistance for several years, captured desistance retrospectively and at a single point rather than as it unfolded. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach, following individuals from release over time, to examine how the contributors to desistance shift across the reintegration journey. Such an approach would better reflect life-course understandings of desistance as a dynamic process that develops through changing circumstances, relationships, and opportunities over time (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003).

In particular, longitudinal research could distinguish between the factors that initiate desistance and those that sustain it. The present findings suggest these contributors are unlikely to remain static: faith, for instance, appeared to act as an initial catalyst for some participants while sustaining an already established prosocial identity for others, and practical supports such as driver's licences or work equipment may be most pivotal immediately after release, with trusted relationships and meaningful employment growing in importance as desistance is maintained. Tracing these shifting influences would clarify when particular forms of support matter most and how interventions might be targeted across different stages of the reintegration journey.

As discussed in the limitations section, future desistance research could also move beyond studying people with lived experience to involving them as active collaborators throughout the research process (Maruna, 2025). Participatory and co-produced approaches have the potential to generate richer and more authentic understandings of desistance while ensuring that research questions, analysis, and interpretation are grounded in lived experience. This is particularly important within Aotearoa, where questions of voice, authorship, and cultural authenticity carry additional weight in representing Māori experiences. Developing such approaches in partnership with Māori researchers and people with lived experience, building on, but moving beyond, the advisory model employed in this study, would enable more self-determined inquiry, better honouring the relational and collective understandings of desistance that this study identified but could only begin to explore.

A further direction concerns the role of trust, which emerged as a central yet often implicit mechanism throughout this study. Participants described trust as something that incarceration had eroded, and that had to be painstakingly rebuilt before meaningful change could occur. Equally, the absence of trust could actively discourage help-seeking, as illustrated by Blyndside's reluctance to seek support from others. Trust has been linked to tertiary desistance (Ugelvik, 2022), yet it remains relatively underexplored as a central focus in its own right within desistance research. Further research could therefore examine more directly how prison environments shape trust, the processes through which trust is rebuilt during reintegration, and the extent to which trust influences individuals' willingness to engage with the services, relationships, and opportunities that support desistance. Such work would deepen understanding of the relational mechanisms through which desistance is achieved and sustained.

Similarly, future research might explore not only whether individuals change, but whether they possess the genuine freedom and opportunity to enact and sustain that change. The present findings suggest that desistance depended not only on internal transformation but also on the structural conditions that determined whether that transformation could translate into a stable and meaningful life. Examining these conditions of possibility and the factors that enable or constrain individuals in converting motivation into lived outcomes represents a valuable direction for future enquiry. Such research would further illuminate the interaction between individual agency and structural opportunity that emerged as a central finding in this thesis.

Future research could also refine sampling strategies in several ways. The present study drew on a small and deliberately diverse sample, offering breadth across experiences but limiting the depth of insight possible into any single group's desistance journey. More focused studies, for example, those centred on women's desistance or on Māori experiences of desistance and reintegration, could provide richer, more contextually specific understandings. Likewise, research focusing on individuals who have experienced repeated imprisonment or multiple recalls could offer greater insight into the processes of relapse, persistence, and renewed desistance. Finally, recruiting participants closer to the point of release would complement the longitudinal approach recommended above. This would enable researchers to examine the critical early stages of reintegration that participants in the present study had largely progressed beyond.

Reflexive Considerations

The reflexive considerations that follow should be read in light of the study's epistemological orientation. Just as participants' accounts are understood as meaningful reconstructions rather than objective records, the researcher's influence is understood not as a threat to objectivity but as integral to an interpretive process in which meaning is co-constructed.

One participant's account warrants particular reflexive attention. Russell notes that he tended towards wanting to please others, and he was also aware that I held Christian beliefs. When discussing his experiences of religion, which had at times seemed difficult or negative, he concluded, "They were good." It is possible that this reflected a wish not to cause offence rather than his settled view, and the interview dynamic may have therefore

shaped his account of these experiences. This is not to discount what he shared, but to acknowledge that his responses, like all interview data, were co-produced within a particular relational context.

A further reflexive consideration concerns the framing I brought to the interviews. Having developed the study around a defined set of domains, I approached the interviews with particular attention to those domains, asking follow-up questions about them and raising them directly when participants did not. This focus may have led my data to foreground these domains over other factors that participants might otherwise have emphasised, a possibility reflected in the discussion of physical activity above.

Conducting the interviews also brought into focus an assumption I had held before beginning this research: a tendency to believe that people's capacity for change was limited. I had been inclined to view those who desisted as individuals who had made mistakes but were fundamentally disposed towards good, while implicitly doubting whether others could change at all. This reflects the kind of fixed, dispositional view of offending that Maruna and King (2009) critique; the assumption that behaviour reflects a settled character rather than choices made within particular circumstances. Encountering participants' accounts, which consistently complicated this assumption, was itself a significant part of the reflexive process and is directly relevant to the arguments developed earlier in this chapter. Furthermore, like Maruna (2001), a few people I spoke to about my research asked, "How do you know they aren't lying to you?" or "How can you prove they are crime-free for over four years?" These questions might have been raised regarding the subjective nature of my research, or, contrarily, they could be related to the research's

topic. This speaks to the idea that people are suspicious of once-incarcerated individuals, seeing them as destined to crime and deceit.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand, from the perspective of formerly incarcerated people in Aotearoa, what they identified as the most important contributors to their desistance from crime. The findings suggest that desistance was not explained by any single factor or domain in isolation. Rather, it emerged as a negotiated process of identity reconstruction, sustained through trusted relationships and shaped by structural conditions that could either enable or obstruct change. Employment, faith, and other domains featured in participants' narratives to varying degrees, and some, most notably housing, featured only minimally; yet across all of them, significance lay less in the domain itself than in the relationships, meaning, opportunities, and recognition it provided, or, in its settled absence from participants' accounts, had already secured.

In sum, the four arguments developed throughout this chapter present a coherent picture of desistance as a relational and structurally conditioned process. Participants' accounts demonstrated that identity change was neither immediate nor complete but was continually negotiated through accountability, self-reflection, and adaptation. This identity work depended upon relationships that recognised and reinforced change, highlighting the importance of tertiary desistance and the social recognition necessary to sustain a non-offending identity. At the same time, these processes unfolded within a criminal justice system that frequently produced the very barriers it sought to overcome, eroding trust, rewarding strategic self-presentation, outsourcing reintegration, and perpetuating stigma

long after release. Consequently, the domains through which desistance is commonly understood mattered principally through what they enabled, rather than as independent contributors in their own right.

In doing so, this thesis contributes several insights to the desistance literature. First, it challenges the tendency to position dispositional and situational explanations of offending as competing alternatives. Instead, this study demonstrated that participants simultaneously accepted personal responsibility while recognising the structural and relational circumstances that shaped their lives. Second, it extends the growing relational turn within desistance research by showing that relationships functioned not simply as supportive contexts, but as the primary mechanism through which identity change was recognised, reinforced, and sustained. Third, the findings suggest that the criminal justice system may inadvertently generate anti-desistance conditions by institutionalising distrust, privileging impression management over transparency, and leaving much of the practical work of reintegration to community organisations. Finally, this study offers two more modest but potentially important contributions: questioning whether the prominence of some commonly studied domains, particularly physical activity, reflects participant priorities or the priorities of researchers themselves, and drawing attention to practical enablers, such as driver's licences and work equipment, which warrant closer attention in accounts of desistance sustained over the longer term than their treatment as concerns of early reintegration would suggest.

Collectively, these findings reinforce that desistance cannot be understood through the lens of either individual agency or structural constraint alone. Participants exercised

genuine agency in accepting responsibility, reconstructing their identities, and pursuing different futures. Yet these efforts were continually shaped by the relationships that supported them and by structural conditions that either expanded or constrained the opportunities available to them. Desistance, therefore, depended on agency but never on agency alone.

The study is necessarily limited by its small, cross-sectional sample and retrospective design, as well as by its reliance on a researcher-led rather than participatory methodology. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the value of the participants' accounts. Instead, they highlight the importance of continuing to explore desistance through diverse methodologies and with broader groups of people with lived experiences.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to a growing body of evidence demonstrating that people can and do change. Blyndside's account of Seth captures much of what these findings suggest that change requires. Recalling the support he received, he explained, "When I was recalled, he took my cars. Twice, he had taken my cars to his home and taken care of it, but a third time he said, no." The refusal mattered as much as the help. What sustained Blyndside was not assistance alone but a relationship in which he was known well enough to be held to account, and in which support was neither unconditional nor withdrawn. The narratives shared by participants challenge enduring assumptions that offending identities are fixed or immutable, and instead reveal desistance as a difficult, ongoing, and deeply human process. If desistance is to be better understood and more effectively supported, attention must move beyond programmes, punishment, and risk

management alone, towards fostering relationships, recognition, and structural conditions that allow change not only to occur but to endure.

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