

# Bringing Criminological Theory to Life

A Lived Experience  
Approach to Crime  
and Desistance



**Edited by**

Emily Turner

Rose Broad

Caroline Miles

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For everyone who is embarking on a journey to change.*

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## About the Editors

**Dr Emily Turner** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Criminology at The University of Manchester. She has carried out prison research for over 15 years with an interest in equality and diversity and the prison experience and in desistance from crime. Her PhD considered the desistance potential of fatherhood among young adults in prison. Emily co-ordinated the University of Manchester's Learning Together initiative, Learning Criminology Inside, from 2017 to 2020.

**Professor Rose Broad** is a Professor of Criminology at the University of Manchester. Her research interests include modern slavery, human trafficking and gender-based abuse. Prior to working in academia, Rose worked for the Probation Service. Along with Emily, Shadd and Caroline, Rose established and delivered the Learning Criminology Inside programme in Manchester. Rose's recent and ongoing research includes a Leverhulme funded project entitled 'Interpreting the Governance of Human Trafficking', and she is the co-lead of the modern slavery strand of work in the Vulnerabilities and Policing Futures research centre. She has published extensively in the area of modern slavery including a co-authored book, *Demystifying Modern Slavery*.

**Dr Caroline Miles** is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Manchester. Caroline's research incorporates gender-based violence and abuse, including filial violence, 'honour'-based abuse and the abuse of women in public as well as homicide, femicide and parricide. Caroline's recent research includes a British Academy funded project examining non-intimate femicide, an N8 Police Research Partnership funded project on the abuse of women runners and continuing research on parricide. Her recent publications include articles on parents' experiences of filial violence during the COVID-19 pandemic (*Journal of Gender Based Violence*, 2024), matricide as a hidden form of femicide (*Current Sociology*, 2023) and the gendered nature of parricide (*Violence Against Women and Girls*, 2022). Caroline's teaching specialisms include a postgraduate course on *Understanding Violence* and an undergraduate course on *Journeys out of Offending*; both of which were taught as part of the Learning Together initiative, Learning Criminology Inside, at the University of Manchester.

**Professor Shadd Maruna** is the Chair of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology at the University of Liverpool and the Past President of the American Society of Criminology (2022–2024). Previously, he has worked at The University of Manchester, University of Cambridge and Rutgers University where he was the

Dean of the School of Criminal Justice. His book *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* was named the Outstanding Contribution to Criminology by the American Society of Criminology. He was also the recipient of the inaugural Research Medal from the Howard League for Penal Reform.

## About the Contributors

**Laura Bui** is Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Manchester. Her research interest, broadly, is on the psychology of crime and violence but with particular focus on the role of culture and perception. She has written scholarly and literary publications on comparative developmental risk and promotive factors for offending, meanings and uses of popular concepts in crime and criminal justice research like vulnerability and the psychopath and understandings of the relatively low crime rate in Japan.

**William Floodgate** is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Manchester, UK. His teaching and research cover a range of criminology and criminal justice topics. He has a particular interest in drug policy and has researched in the following areas: addiction, treatment and recovery; drug education; image and performance enhancing drug use and cannabis regulation.

**Hannah Sian Hammond** is a Chartered Psychologist who completed her PhD in the School of Law at Royal Holloway, University of London in 2018. Since then, Hannah has led on several research projects focused on sport, motivation and desistance from crime. Dr Hammond has held a position as a dissertation supervisor for students at Royal Holloway, and is currently a part time Teaching Fellow in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Portsmouth. Dr Hammond's research interests include the use of sport in prisons as a tool for health promotion and rehabilitation and the use of sport in the community to promote desistance from crime among children and young people. Hannah recently led on the monitoring and evaluation of Levelling the Playing Field, a 4-year pilot project which aimed to use sport to tackle disproportionality among children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds in sport and the justice system. Hannah spoke in parliament about her support for the project and its aims and is passionate about the power of sport to tackle health and social inequalities.

**Will Mahaffey** (also known as Billy) is the subject of this book and the writing has been in collaboration with him. He has been a soldier, been in prison and is an athlete, taking part in Iron Man competitions and has previously swam the English Channel in a relay team. He is currently a Project Manager in a large company. Importantly, Billy is now clean and sober after many years of alcohol and drug dependency. He is drug dependent but doesn't use and someone who

experiences mental health problems who is happy. He is married with two children. Follow him on Instagram @soldier\_prisoner\_ironman.

**Rosie Meek** is a Chartered Psychologist and was founding Head of the School of Law at Royal Holloway University of London. She held previous academic appointments at the University of Southampton, Teesside University and the Open University. As well as researching and writing widely on the role of the voluntary sector, education and health promotion in prisons, Professor Meek is best known for her work on the importance of sport and physical activity for incarcerated populations. In addition to dozens of chapters, journal articles and evaluation reports on the topic, her book *Sport in Prison: Exploring the Role of Physical Activity in Correctional Settings* (Routledge) was published in 2013, and in 2018, the UK government published her national review (on behalf of the Ministry of Justice) of sport and physical activity in youth and adult prisons, leading to a number of policy changes. Rosie is also a certified yoga teacher.

**Emma Murray** is an Associate Professor in Criminal and Social Justice at the UKRI funded Centre of Excellence for Equity in Uniformed Public Services at Anglia Ruskin University, while also holding the position of Criminologist in Residence at the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT). Emma's work is dedicated to creative and engaged scholarship with justice-affected communities – frequently working closely with those who have military experience in their life course. Starting from the premise that veterans' experiences of the justice sector require creative forms of thought and analysis, Emma coined the term *Veteranality* to understand the various institutions, practices and discourses that shape veterans' experiences and identities in the justice system. Her work is influenced by multiple disciplines (criminology, sociology, criminal justice, international relations, military studies, art and design) and sectors (justice, health, education, defence, third), integrating diverse perspectives to address social inequality.

**Helen Nichols** is a Reader in Criminology at the University of Hull, UK. Helen's research broadly focuses on the impact of prisons on people who live and work within them. Her PhD research explored adult male prisoners' experiences of education in the processes of personal change and coping with the experience of imprisonment and led to the publication of '*Understanding the Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men: (Re)education*' with Routledge in 2021. Helen has also conducted research on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on access to healthcare for people under probation supervision. She continues to actively research in the field of penology and is currently working on projects exploring the well-being of prison staff and culture within carceral spaces. Helen is also interested and experienced in working with people with lived experience of the criminal justice system and continues to work on collaborative academic publications in this area.

**Brogan Pritchard** is a first year PhD student at the University of Manchester. Her research interest is in the prison experience more broadly, with a focus on gender

and health. Her PhD considers the lived experience of reproductive healthcare in women's prisons.

**Lisa Williams** is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology, at the Department of Criminology, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester. She has been researching drugs for over 25 years. Her interests revolve around: recreational drug taking, including why people take drugs and how their drug taking changes over the life course; dependent drug use, recently publishing about synthetic cannabinoids consumption among vulnerable populations; and creative research methods, especially arts-based and visual techniques. Since 1999, she has worked on the *Illegal Leisure* longitudinal study exploring changing drug taking patterns from adolescence to adulthood. The findings have been published in *Illegal Leisure Revisited* and *Changing Lives, Changing Drug Journeys*. Her recent projects include a visual ethnography of where and how people store their recreational drugs in the home and a public engagement project co-creating cross stitches with empowering and harm reduction messages about drugs and people who use them.

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## Foreword by Adele Owen

This book tells the story of Billy. I've never met Billy but I am very proud to say that I know a man called Will.

Will and I have known each other for a few years, and you could say we have an unlikely friendship. This is because I used to be a serving police officer, and I very much doubt Will would have wanted our paths to cross back then! He jokes even now about having a friend who is a former copper, and I feel that him asking me of all people to write this foreword reveals something of the fun, mischievous side of his character. That said, I am completely honoured to do so.

I now work in the NHS, focused on preventing suicide and supporting those who are bereaved by suicide. This is how Will and I came to meet.

I heard him speak about losing his dad to suicide and the impact it had on him and his family. When we got to know one another, he generously agreed to share his story for our Shining a Light on Suicide campaign.

Suicide grief is often described as 'grief with the volume turned up'. The impact of his father's suicide was devastating for Will and his family, and the resulting trauma led to his life jumping onto a different axis and Will became solely responsible for his own survival at a young age.

He says he wishes that someone could have stepped in early to help him find the right path. Even when he was on the battlefield as a soldier in Afghanistan, just a day into his 21st year, he felt vulnerable and still a kid.

This is the important upstream work that Will highlights in his story as being so important.

Although this book primarily explores criminological theory through Will's life story, it raises important questions about how society supports vulnerable individuals. Early and meaningful support can transform lives.

Will has generously shared his experiences to support professionals in the criminal justice sector, emphasising the importance of prioritising trauma-informed care. He also offers hope to those who feel trapped by their life circumstances.

His journey from facing extreme challenges is a true testament to his character and resilience. Through embracing pivotal 'light switch' moments and working to maintain self-control, combined with the unwavering support of his wife, Louise, Will has built a life filled with purpose and meaning.

**xvi** *Foreword*

These factors have all contributed to shaping him into the inspiring man he is today. I am incredibly proud to call Will – Billy – my friend.

*Adele Owen is a Suicide Prevention Programme Manager at NHS Greater Manchester.*

# Acknowledgements

The first person we need to thank is Billy. Billy made our teaching in the prison on our Learning Together programme, where we met, a pleasure. Thanks also go to those who studied alongside Billy and in the other courses we ran inside prisons. Prison-based students in the Learning Together classroom brought theory to life for university students, and this has inspired the book. These students also helped us see things differently and develop our ideas and thinking on the issues discussed in the book.

Billy also started the conversations about this book and we thank him for that. Writing this book has been a real privilege and we appreciate Billy's openness, honesty and reflexivity in the interviews so that those writing for this edited collection had such rich data to work with. The authors who worked on this all expressed their enjoyment of working on this project which shows how special Billy's journey is.

Thanks also need to go to all those who contributed to this book. The care and sensitivity they showed to Billy's story is valued by us and by Billy.

A special thank you to Brogan Pritchard and Daisy Sleight for all their work in formatting the book and checking references. Their thoroughness and attention to detail was second to none, and they never moaned about how we did not always reference as we wrote! Any mistakes are down to the authors who probably changed things after they had formatted it. Thanks also to Kate Ryan for creating the road map of Billy's life in Chapter One.

Thanks to Adele Owen for carefully reading a draft of the book and pointing out misinterpretations of Billy's story and providing education to us in how to write about suicide. Thanks also to Louise, Billy's wife, for proof-reading the book – we hope the book does justice to what an incredible woman you are.

Billy – you are a true inspiration and at the same time you never fail to make us laugh. Hope this book does what you wanted it to and inspires those who may end up working in the criminal justice system to be more compassionate and ensures those who experience trauma get the support they need.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*Rose Broad<sup>a</sup>, Caroline Miles<sup>a</sup>, Emily Turner<sup>a</sup>, Laura Bui<sup>a</sup>,  
Lisa Williams<sup>a</sup>, Shadd Maruna<sup>b</sup> and Will Mahaffey<sup>a</sup>*

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### How This Book Came to Be and Why

#### *Will Mahaffey*

The book was collaborative from the beginning. It was no one's specific idea but something which grew organically through conversation.

I met Emily, Rose, Caroline and Shadd when they taught me on the Learning Together course while I was in prison.<sup>1</sup> I remember emailing Emily when I got out of prison, I just thought it would be good to connect with a good side of life and people who have helped me. At that stage I said I would like to come in and speak to students, which I then did. I wanted to tell my story and thought a good platform is telling those learning about people in the criminal justice system. From taking part in Learning Together I realised I liked helping students understand the issues that people face in prison and when going through the process of desistance. This continued when doing guest lectures at the University, especially with all the questions the students asked. The students were all really interested but often had no idea about what life is like for people in prison or involved in crime, and a lot of information about prison that they get may not be realistic. This made me realise it would be good to tell more people my story. I wanted to work with Emily, Rose, Caroline and Shadd on the book because I trust them. There are so many bad people you come across in life and when you come across good people you know. This trust became most apparent after attending the Fishmonger's Hall Learning Together alumni event on 29

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<sup>1</sup>'Learning Together' is an innovative prison education course where university students go into a prison and learn alongside prison-based students. This course was called 'Learning Criminology Inside' and was organised by University of Manchester staff. There is more on this in Chapter 4.

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**Bringing Criminological Theory to Life, 1–21**

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November 2019. I wanted to go to this event because of the opportunity to be around more good people and because Emily asked me to go. Unfortunately, this event turned into a tragedy and two people were killed.<sup>2</sup> The natural instinct during the event to put Emily, Rose and a university student (who I had met on the course) first proved why I wanted them to write the book. I just wanted to get them out of there and away from it because I knew they were so uncomfortable and did not know what to do. As we spent more time together and especially after London, I became friends with Emily and Rose. This is a really personal project – it is, after all, all about my own life. I would not have engaged in a project like this with someone who wasn't a friend as they wouldn't care about me, it would be all about them.

I just want the main thing this book does to be to help people see that we (people who commit crime) are not bad. We've just made mistakes. And when you listen to the life that I've had, where else are you gonna end up? I just want people to make fewer judgements. And maybe help more, for the people who need it. One of the things that I hate is when people say 'you need help' but don't offer any, just pass on their opinion. There's a saying isn't there, 'stop pulling people out the river and go upstream and find out why they are in the river in the first place'. And if this book can help people change their views, this might help with finding out what some of the problems might be.

There is little point targeting the people already working in the criminal justice system to tell them my story, they already have their opinions. It is people who might end up working there I wanted to target. Someone might read this who is going to be a prison officer and they might treat everyone better in there. Instead of being a twat. Like there could be so many little benefits. It could be someone who's going to be a police officer who thinks, 'yeah, I could look after him a bit more when he's in the police cell'. Or when you got someone banging on the prison cell, on the cell walls in the police station, instead of being pissed off, like a majority are, you think 'I wonder what's up, what's going through his head? What's he been through? Is he alright in there?' There could be loads of little things that could really help someone, who's not a bad person, they're just making the wrong choices.

What I want people to take from the book is to not make judgements about people on how they behave while they are in pain. When people are hurt, people

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<sup>2</sup>The Fishmonger's Hall event was planned to celebrate Learning Together alumni after five years of courses taking place across the country. At this event Usman Khan (previously convicted of terrorism who took part in Learning Together at HMP Whitemoor), while wearing a fake suicide vest, stabbed a number of delegates and two (Saskia Jones and Jack Merritt) tragically died. Usman Khan was shot dead by police after being chased out of the venue by other delegates. This incident raised many questions about why Usman Khan, who was under the supervision of the Probation Service, was allowed to attend the event. In the inquest in 2021 the jury recorded a verdict of unlawful killing. The inquest found there were 'missed opportunities' to prevent the deaths of the victims, as Security Services had intelligence that was not shared with those managing him in the community ([Judiciary, 2021](#)).

do not make the same decisions they would if not hurting – this is true for me and maybe for others in the book.

I want people who might be reading the book to see how quickly things can go wrong through drink and drugs. I want people to understand that people with mental health problems often try and think their way out of their thinking problems, which is what I did for a long time until I realised that I needed to get help. I want my story to show that I am only where I am now due to all the people who have helped me along the way.

This book is based on my experiences and how I remember them now. This is my truth and only my truth.

At the time of writing this in October 2024 I have got married and got a promotion at work. I am studying, and I am carrying on with triathlons and Ironman competitions. The problems that I've got now are normal problems and not problems like I've got heroin in my glove box and I'm being pulled over by the police! I have now got a relationship with my mother which is the kind of relationship between a mother and son everybody would want.

The journey has been long and hard but I'm ok now.

## **Why This Book Is Important and Its Original Contribution**

*Rose Broad, Caroline Miles, Emily Turner, Laura Bui, Lisa Williams and Shadd Maruna*

This book covers core aspects of developmental and life course criminology (DLCC) and the journeys into and out of offending (desistance theory), in a completely unique way. While there is a substantial body of literature on these theories, this book provides a different lens through which the theories can be viewed – through a single individual's life story. Will's (hereafter known as Billy) rich and fascinating life provides the scaffolding for seven rigorous, evidence-based and scholarly chapters on key issues in criminology. This storytelling, life history approach provides depth to understanding how people can be drawn into crime and how they experience the desistance process. This original contribution provides a valuable addition to existing research that provides greater breadth through analysis of large datasets and thematic analysis through interviews undertaken with groups of people. Existing literature on DLCC and desistance theory tend to be written in an abstract way. While this literature often uses empirical research and examples from participants, a single case study approach is rarely taken. This book applies criminological theory to a single person's life experiences, to show the interconnectedness of theories and the complexities of people's lives, truly bringing theory to life.

Along the path of his life, Billy has transitioned from being a soldier, to a prisoner, to a university student involved in the Learning Together curriculum, to a father and an acclaimed athlete. This journey provides the inspiration for seven commissioned essays from leading experts in criminology in the areas they are writing about. The book's unique approach is the use of a number of different authors writing about one person. The book has been co-produced with Billy.

As explained above, the idea for the book came from Billy and he has been involved in the development of the book throughout, telling his story as the rest of the authors shaped his narrative around their areas of expertise, to unpick how Billy's experiences can help readers to understand explanations of crime and the desistance process.

Stories are an important and credible way of learning. Stories help to convey emotion, allowing the reader to connect and empathise with the subject of the story, and allowing people to both reveal and experience hidden aspects of their lives (East et al., 2010; MacLennan & Gosling, 2020). It is through Billy's stories that we illuminate the theories and perspectives outlined below, referencing them throughout the book in the individual chapters. By explaining Billy's experiences, we add to the body of knowledge that aims to support people who are in vulnerable positions, provide alternative opportunities to those with limited options and reduce reoffending. As Farrall and Bowling state (1999), bringing data to life and considering the practical implications is central to criminology:

A theory of desistance is not a criminological luxury. By helping to elucidate some of its facets, a theory of desistance would enable CJ policies aimed at reducing reoffending (i.e. the work of probation service) to be "fine-tuned" and for the elements of those interventions which "work" best to be more thoroughly understood. Without a theory of why people stop offending, it is difficult to envision which policies and practices are needed if offending behaviour is to be addressed by CJ agencies. (p. 254)

Despite the crucial role of experiences and insights from desisters themselves to inform the efforts of the criminal justice system to help people to stop offending (McNeill et al., 2012), we also acknowledge the limitations of the case study approach utilised in this book. Every person's story is unique, and it would be absurd to seek to draw broad generalisations from a single individual's story. There is no singular story that captures the experience of every person in the criminal justice system. Moreover, Billy is a white, Christian man from a particular socio-economic background, and although many of his experiences are common among those in the justice system, others may face very different challenges and issues in their journeys out of crime due to their race, gender and other characteristics.

The point of autobiography in social research is not to generalise to a wider population but rather to glean the invaluable insights that can only come from walking a mile in another's shoes or seeing the world from their insider perspective. No one reads the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* or the *Diary of Anne Frank* because we think these stories are perfectly representative of the enslaved or victims of the Holocaust. Yet, no one could ever deny the unique insights these first-person accounts provide to worlds that most of us will, thankfully, never experience.

We do not promise anything quite as profound with this book and of course are making no comparisons with Billy's life. The point is only that human beings

have, for centuries, learnt through hearing other's stories – myths, fables, fiction, biographies and yes anecdotes. Indeed, there is considerable research that people remember stories better than abstracted facts or statistics (see e.g. Graeber et al., 2024) and that stories impact us in ways that other ways of presenting data simply cannot (see Roche & Sadowsky, 2003). Thus, while we acknowledge the limitations of the approach, there are also many strengths in allowing concepts and theories to be brought to life through an in-depth analysis of Billy's journey of desistance.

### *A Note on Names*

The subject of our case study (and we use subject here, not object, as he has contributed throughout the process including in the analysis) was known as Billy for most of his life. He is Billy to family, old friends and to his wife, Louise. But when he started his first job post prison everyone at work called him Will. He says this is a result of having to write his name in full on job applications. Employers read his name and subsequently called him William and then Will. Prior to prison he always gained employment through friends who would introduce him to employers and colleagues as Billy. This has left him being called by two names, but all new people in his life refer to him as Will and he would introduce himself as Will now. This is why the introduction is written by Will but the book refers to Billy throughout.

## **Key Literature Drawn on Throughout the Book**

The aim of the book is to bring criminological theory to life. This section will outline the main theories this book will bring to life using Billy's story: DLCC and desistance theory.

### *Developmental and Life Course Criminology*

DLCC is concerned with how and why individual antisocial behaviour develops over the life course, 'from the womb to the tomb' (Farrington et al., 2018, p. xiii). Offending and drug use can be understood as symptoms of a larger syndrome of antisocial behaviour that develops in childhood and often persists into adulthood (Farrington, 1997). The DLCC approach develops research on the concept of criminal careers (Farrington, 2005), integrating what is known on human, social and biological development from the field of psychology, with what is known from the field of sociology about the influence of social structures, life events and life transitions on an individual to explain and document changes in offending or drug use throughout one's life (Farrington, 2003; Hser et al., 2007; Jolliffe & Auty, 2023). In DLCC and drugs research, the concepts of 'criminal career' and 'drugs career' have developed in parallel with comparable features (Farrington et al., 2018, p. xiii). Both attempt to describe an individual's offending or drug use and patterns of behaviour. They also endeavour to illuminate the process of when

a person's involvement in crime or drug use begins, known as onset; if and when it persists, accelerates or escalates, de-accelerates or de-escalates; and finally when their career desists or terminates; and at what ages these occur (Blumstein, 2012; Hser et al., 2007). Other notable characteristics are the duration of the career; types of crimes committed or drugs consumed; the frequency of offending or drug taking; and whether patterns in specialisation and severity or chronic/dependent drug use can be discerned. Longitudinal data are collected and analysed to develop these ideas.

Research into the age of onset has consistently found that the earlier the onset of offending or drug use, the more persistent the career (Eggleston & Bacon, 2018; Kandel et al., 1992; Moffitt et al., 2001), and in respect of crime, the more serious, frequent and versatile the offences committed (Loeber & Le Blanc, 1990). Consequently, the most violent, chronic and severe of criminal careers are of focus for research with direct policy and practical applications (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011). Similarly, drug careers which lead to drug dependence, even though people who are dependent on drugs only represent a minority of the overall drug using population, have received much research and policy attention because of the perceived harm connected to this behaviour.

DLCC also includes the risk factor prevention paradigm. First introduced to criminology from research in public health on drug and alcohol misuse in adolescence and early adulthood (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992), this body of research identifies individual and social characteristics that predict and explain later offending or drug use, known as risk factors, and recommends preventative measures to address them (Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Welsh and Farrington, 2007). Biological, individual, family, social indicators and neighbourhood risk factors have consistently been identified to explain involvement in offending or drug use (see Farrington et al., 2017; Hawkins & Catalano, 1992; Jolliffe et al., 2017; Nawi et al., 2021).

Family-related risk factors in childhood and adolescence, however, are found to be the strongest explanation for later offending; they are also one of the strongest explanations specifically for persistence in offending alongside occupation, peers, mental health issues (e.g. anxiety and stress) and alcohol/drug misuse (Basto-Pereira & Farrington, 2022). As risk factors concentrate only on problems and deficits, protective factors have been explored to emphasise the necessity of reducing risk while promoting protective influences in strategy responses. In a systematic review of risk and protective factors for adolescent drug use, Nawi et al. (2021, p. 2) conclude it is the result of a 'complex interaction' of individual, family and community factors.

### ***Desistance Theory***

Desistance from crime has been defined as a process that supports 'the long-term abstinence from criminal behaviour among those for whom offending had become a pattern of behaviour' (McNeill et al., 2012, para 4). There are debates around the definition of desistance and how we measure it, with some seeing the

cessation of crime as requiring some level of permanence, and others recognising that pathways out of criminal offending are often not straightforward and reoffending can happen, thereby reflecting a more fluid definition of desistance (McNeill et al., 2012). The multitude of theories and debates within the desistance literature show that the pathway to desistance is often very complex, non-linear and often characterised by a zig zag pattern – something that this book will illustrate.

Historically, desistance theory has been divided into two main categories. The first category of desistance theories focuses on the importance of external or structural factors in supporting the process of change. Age-graded social control theory argues that as people grow older, they are likely to experience key life transitions (or ‘turning points’) such as employment, marriage and military service which provide people with greater informal social control (Laub & Sampson, 1993, p. 304; Laub & Sampson, 2003) and consequently more to lose by further offending. The second category of desistance theories considers the importance of cognitive, internal or subjective factors in the process of change (Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Giordano et al., 2002; Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Maruna, 2001). The cognitive transformations that occur involve a reformulation of identity and autobiography (Giordano et al., 2002; King, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Rumgay, 2004). Farrall and Bowling (1999) discuss the agency–structure divide in the desistance literature, whereby traditionally, theorists have either concentrated on internal factors and rational actions or life changes and structural constraints; people are ‘super-agents’ or ‘super-dupes’ (p. 261). Weaver (2016) adds to this, arguing accounts are often overly socialised or overly cognitive. Using Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, Farrall and Bowling (1999) argued that journeys out of crime can and should be explained by considering individual decision-making *and* life changes. This is because ‘neither the agent nor the structure truly ‘exists’ independently of one another’ (Farrall & Bowling, 1999, p. 255). This combined subjective-social model has since become more accepted and supported by others working in the field (Carlsson, 2012; King, 2012; LeBel et al., 2008; McNeill & Whyte, 2007).

Interactionist theories still debate exactly how structure and agency interact, and which is most important, but recognise that people can experience structural changes which then impact their identity or vice versa (Weaver, 2016). Bottoms and Shapland (2016) found desistance to be an iterative process in which agency and behaviour interact, and that behaviour can be constrained or facilitated by the structural aspects of individuals’ lives. King (2013) found that reflection on social circumstances is important, and that people will change their priorities accordingly; Weaver (2016) summarises this well, stating ‘agency is conditioned by an individual’s social context’ (p. 25).

### *Turning Points*

Unlike developmental theories that focus on the idea that people get locked into certain trajectories, such as Moffitt’s (1993) Developmental Taxonomy of

adolescent-limited and life course persistent offenders, the age-graded theory of informal social control emphasises the impact of life events and the reactions of individuals and social groups on offending across the life course (see [Laub & Sampson, 2003](#); [Sampson & Laub, 1993](#)). This theory emerged from re-analysis of data originally collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in 1950 for their study of 500 boys followed from adolescence to age 32. To further develop the theory, longitudinal data on these men were collected up to age 70, with a subset of the original sample also interviewed about their life histories and their interpretation of their turning points ([Laub & Sampson, 2003](#)).

[Laub and Sampson's \(2003\)](#) theory argues that people can change in reaction to life events, and what matters in controlling our behaviour is the social bonds we have with others and institutions, and the strength of these bonds. In other words, life events and informal social control are not merely correlated with offending, but are *causes* of offending, and this control will manifest differently at different ages. Key life events, referred to by [Laub and Sampson \(1993\)](#) as 'structural turning points' (p. 304), such as marriage, stable employment or joining the military, can lead to desistance partly because of the social capital they bring and the potential to strengthen bonds, increasing informal controls. Turning points were recast as 'triggering events' ([Laub et al., 1998](#), p. 225) which revealed the salience of human agency in desisting from offending, in that when confronted with a key life event that provides opportunity for change, individuals can decide to 'knife off' their past from their present and make the changes necessary to do so, creating a new sense of self and identity ([Laub & Sampson, 2003](#), p. 148). Knifing off is to distance themselves from potential causes of deviancy, and physical criminal environments ([Maruna & Roy, 2007](#)). Criminal behaviour is conceptualised as a 'situated choice', and it is human agency – the ability to exert control over one's life – that can be used to understand and explain an individual's behaviour (see [Laub & Sampson, 2003](#), p. 281). According to this theory, changes in one's life, including desistance, can happen at any point, and life is viewed as more unpredictable than is acknowledged in developmental theories on offending, so that the number of possible trajectories is endless. There is a spectrum of social situations, and total institutions – such as the military – have more potential for knifing off than less dramatic life changes like marriage. This is an age-graded theory which asserts that these turning points will have more of an impact after people have reached their mid-20s, by which time most people have the capacity for subjective aspirations and are more selective in their activities and company ([Maruna, 1999](#)).

Drugs researchers have examined how age-graded social controls, in the form of transitions to adulthood, impact drug use trajectories (see [Bachman et al., 2001](#); [Shiner, 2009](#)). Inspired by the work of [Laub and Sampson \(2003\)](#), [Williams \(2013\)](#) developed an integrated explanation for recreational drug use across the early part of the life course from adolescence to young adulthood. Analysing data from the *Illegal Leisure* study (see [Aldridge et al., 2011](#)), she argued that life course journeys and drug journeys intersect. Exploring the transition from adolescence to adulthood, she found the absence of adult roles in adolescence provided the freedom to take drugs. Yet, when adult roles in the form of full-time