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The Decision to Give Up Crime'

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Editors’ Note

Maurice Cusson’s book, Why Delinquency?, represents one of the most thoroughgoing attempts to explain crime as rational conduct. In the present chapter he and a colleague, Pierre Pinsonneault, employ the same approach to explore the neglected topic of desistance from crime. Their material is drawn from interviews with 17 ex-robbers in Canada as well as some ex-offenders’ biographies. The main factors they see as involved in desistance—"shock" resulting from some aversive experience when committing robbery, "delayed deterrence" involving recognition of the inevitability of capture, a reduced ability to "do time," fear of imprisonment, an overall increase in the anxiety connected with a life of crime, and a reevaluation of criminal life and its pointlessness—are neatly summarized in their diagram. Also included in this diagram is the concept of "backsliding"—the result of temptation—which would be a useful addition to our own speculative desistance model reproduced in the Introduction. Cusson and Pinsonneault’s analysis illustrates, therefore, how the rational choice framework presented in this volume is likely to be refined and improved as a result of new empirical research. A methodological note: It also provides an example of the degree of care needed in interpreting interview material. As the authors observe, having a worthwhile job seems to be important in desistance, but it was not spontaneously mentioned by the men they interviewed.

It is an understatement to say that the relationship between age and crime is fairly close. Let us recall three facts: First, the rate of arrests according to age starts a sharp decline at the end of adolescence. Second, among adult recidivists a reduction in criminal activity takes place with aging (Glueck and Glueck, 1937). Third, according to Blumstein and Cohen (1982:50), the total duration of the career of persons convicted for index crimes and who started crime at 18 years of age was 5.6 years. We must add, however, that this average hides important variations: There

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are offenders who start their adult career at 18 and end it in their forties.

These findings would be inconceivable if desistance from crime were not a frequent occurrence. Offenders give up crime almost as often as they get into it. To die a criminal, one would almost have to die a violent death.

Dropout rates from criminal careers are rather variable. Blumstein and Cohen (1982:38) noted three periods: from 20 to 30 years of age, from 30 to 42 years, and from 43 to 60 years. Between the ages of 20 and 30 the dropout rates are fairly high; they are fairly low between 30 and 42, and from 42 to 60 they become quite high again. The physical wear and tear, it seems, forces people to retire.

We know that most offenders give up crime eventually. But what else do we know? What makes a person decide to stop committing crimes? What are the reasons behind such a decision? What are the circumstances? The timing? Interviews with ex-offenders are essential if we are to understand the decision-making process that puts an end to a criminal career. Very few researchers have done this, and understandably so. It is not easy to trace, contact, and interview ex-prisoners who have been out of the system for several years. It was only after some difficulty that we succeeded in interviewing a small group of 17 ex-offenders and asking what made them put an end to their criminal activities. These men had all committed armed robbery. They were recidivists. They were between 30 and 40 years of age and had not been arrested during the course of the 5 preceding years. Later we learned that almost all of them had committed their last crime between the ages of 20 and 30.

There are further signs that our interviewees had really given up crime. First, before the interview, we told our subjects that the topic would be the abandonment of crime; second, what they told us of their present life convinced us that they had actually given up crime. A detailed description of the methodology and of the data has been published elsewhere (Pinsonneault, 1984).

Our findings are mainly based on the statements of these men. However, to complete this source, which we must admit is far from being comprehensive, we have consulted a number of autobiographies written by ex-offenders. We also refer to a few studies on the subject.

Shock

The decision to give up crime is generally triggered by a shock of some sort, by a delayed deterrence process, or both (see Figure 5.1). Conwell's remark in *The Professional Thief* is still valid: "It is generally necessary for the thief to suffer some shock or jolt before he will face the future seriously" (Sutherland, 1937: 182).

It was often during the commission of their last crime that our subjects
suffered this shock. One of them was wounded by the police during a shoot-out as he was leaving a bank. Another saw his partner killed by police bullets. A third told us that his accomplice had tried to kill him to get his share of the loot.

It frequently happens, too, that the crime that precedes the decision to stop takes place in a climate of intense fear that culminates in sheer panic. In his autobiography, Malcolm Braly (1976) tells the story of his
last attempt at burglary. It is so apt that it is worth citing even though it is a bit long.

I went broke and convinced myself it would be a small risk to take something easy, just enough for food and rent, and I was out in the night, prowling a nursery and garden-supply house, when the lights of a squad car washed over me, and I was sure they had spotted me crouched there in the underbrush. I bolted in an instant panic to run stumbling and frequently falling across a large empty lot, expecting at any moment to see spotlights ahead. I would be snared from the darkness like a terrified rabbit.

The last time I fell I landed in a small stand of underbrush, and crawled deeper into this thin cover to lie gasping with exhaustion. My throat burned with a deep and painful fire and I was far more alarmed at the erratic hammering of my own heart than I was at the possibility I might be questioned by the police.

How grotesque I seemed to myself. The boy who had climbed the sides of buildings with such a reckless heart was gone, and in his place had appeared this middle-aged man who knew only one way to fail.

I decided that night on the boldest move I thought possible and I wrote Knox Burger asking him to loan me the fare to New York, to the Magic City, and this good man telegraphed me the money within an hour of receiving my plea for help. Once more I set off in pursuit of my real life. (Braly, 1976: 372)

Other times, the shock takes the form of a very severe sentence and all that goes with it. The man condemned to a long prison sentence loses not only his freedom; he can also lose someone dear to him. Alone in his cell he learns one day that his wife is unfaithful, that she has become a prostitute, that she has asked for a divorce, or that she has committed suicide. Some of the men we interviewed had in fact lost either a wife or an intimate girlfriend.

A French armed robber who had killed a policeman during a shoot-out was condemned to death and spent 13 months in the death cell before being reprieved. This experience, he writes, made him a different man: "I began to ask myself questions about life, death, the mystery of creation." (Guillo, 1977: 210). A few years later, his wife, who had refused to ask for a divorce, died of cancer, and he was unable to get out of prison to go and see her.

Delayed Deterrence

The men began to see the entire criminal justice system as an apparatus which clumsily but relentlessly swallows offenders and wears them down. (Shover. 1983: 212)

At first glance, multirecidi-visiters are living examples of the ineffectiveness of punishment. Yet there seems to be a relationship between the fear of punishment and the abandonment of crime. Men who for years could not
be intimidated despite many severe punishments end by deciding to go straight mainly because they do not want to go back to prison.

Delayed deterrence is the gradual wearing down of the criminal drive caused by the accumulation of punishments. In the long run, the succession of arrests and incarcerations do have their effect. They engender a pervasive fear, which over the years becomes acute and makes acting out more and more difficult.

This delayed deterrence has four components: (a) a higher estimate of the cumulative probability of punishment, (b) the increasing difficulty of "doing time," (c) an awareness of the weight of previous convictions on the severity of the sentences, and (d) a spreading of fear.

Higher Estimate of the Likelihood of Punishment

It is clear that, with age, criminals raise their estimates of the certainty of punishment. They come to terms with the simple fact that the more crimes they commit, the greater the cumulative probability of arrest. This fact is often overlooked; people seem to think that the probability that an offender will be arrested is equal to the probability of being arrested for a single crime. This obviously does not apply to the career criminal. What must be considered in the career criminal's case is the cumulative probability of punishment—that which is calculated on the total number of his or her crimes. Young delinquents generally do not realize that each new crime increases the probability of their being caught. On the other hand, all the ex-convicts that we met agreed that those who commit crimes regularly sooner or later run the risk of finding themselves behind bars. There is a term for this in Canadian penitentiaries: "the law of averages" (also noted by Letkemann, 1973, p.37). As expressed by one of our interviewees, "Every time you commit one, you risk being arrested. The law of averages is against you; the prisons are there to prove it." With age, the criminal comes to the conclusion that theft is a bad risk: If you steal, you'll find yourself inside fast enough, because the odds are against you. You're known to the cops; you may have more experience, but you're not as quick.

Increasing Difficulty of Prison Life

The ex-offenders that we met were unanimous in acknowledging that, with age, it is more and more difficult to do time. (Maguire, 1982:8, made the same observation that with age the prison seems to be "more painful than in the past.") As they grow older they can no longer stand prison life and the company of other inmates. Even more important, they feel very keenly that they are wasting time and ruining their lives. Braly (1976) experienced this feeling while serving his last sentence. "I had seldom pulled time as hard as this. I had always had my real life to look forward to. Now it seemed it might well be behind me. The waste of this precious
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...time appalled me” (1976:362). Shover (1983:211) likewise said of the men he interviewed, "Most of the men became acutely aware of time as a diminishing exhaustible resource." One of his subjects, speaking of prison, said, "It's just knocking time out of my life!"

Fear of Longer Sentences for Repeat Convictions

We know that the more active a defendant's criminal file, the greater the risk of a long sentence. Criminals know this as well. The majority of our subjects told us that the fear of incurring a long prison term the next time had an influence on their decision to stop.

Increased Fear

Gradually, fear infiltrates every aspect of the criminal's life. The armed robber, once he has the money, is afraid to leave the bank in case the police are waiting outside to shoot him. He lives in daily fear. He feels under constant stress, paranoid: "You're always on edge, on pills." It's a strange life, too. You're always nervous. Cause there's always something they can pin on you. You never know what's gonna happen. That makes it exciting too, but it gets you after a while." (West, 1978:186).

Assessment

Thus, there comes a time when the recidivist's will to continue in crime is weakened by the corrosive action of delayed deterrence or by a shock of some sort. The offender then enters a period of crisis. Anxious and dissatisfied, he takes stock of his life and his criminal activity (Cormier et al., 1959:40; Shover, 1983:210). The conclusions he arrives at, on the whole, will be (1) that theft does not pay enough considering the risks involved ("Is it worthwhile doing 4 to 5 years for a couple of thousand dollars?"), and (2) that the whole criminal way of life has become a problem. The following is a statement made by Maguire (1982):

The impetus to think seriously about retirement from crime altogether seemed to come in many cases from a gradual disenchantment with the criminal life in its totality: the inability to trust people; the frequent harassment by the police; the effects on wives and children when the offender is in prison. (Maguire, 1982:89)

Our interviewees arrived at a point where their way of life seemed senseless: "I lost my taste for spending $300 to $400 a night just to show

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2 Let us say in passing that theft is not judged in moral but in strictly utilitarian terms. Our subjects feel no guilt and do not take the harm caused their victims into consideration when they decide to abandon crime; it is the cost/benefit angle that counts.
off." They also had plenty of problems with their peers: conflicts over women, arguments over the sharing of loot, fights with rival gangs, and the like. Furthermore, it seems that at a certain age there is no longer any desire to associate with disreputable, coarse, untrustworthy, and violent people. "You can't have an intelligent conversation with those people." One comes to see the underworld as a dead end.

It is not hard to understand, then, that by the time they retired from crime, most of our subjects had come to believe that they would always be the losers if they continued along the same path. This feeling of failure was noted by Cormier et al. (1959:44) by Irwin (1970:156), and by Shover (1983:211).

A Reevaluation of Goals

Having made this assessment, the offender tries to envision the future and see what awaits him. What does he see? A long succession of incarcerations that will end only when he is old enough to receive his old-age pension. Or he sees deterioration, alcoholism, and suicide. The prospect of dying in prison seems to him the ultimate failure. "I would probably end in one of the small graveyards that are part of every prison reservation" (Braly, 1976:336; see also Carr, 1975:180, and Shover, 1983:211).

The glimpse of the future, then, forces the criminal to change his course, even if it means giving up his past aspirations. As Herbert Simon (1955:111) observed, the level of aspirations tends to adjust to the realm of possibility. The person who does not succeed in getting what he wants will lower his aspirations. This is somewhat the case for the offender who decides to retire. He decides to give up the affluent life, to do without his Cadillac and be satisfied with a more modest income. (See also Cormier et al, 1959:44; Irwin, 1970:209; Shover, 1983:212.)

The Decision

What does the decision to give up crime mean exactly? Our subjects described it as the decision never to return to prison: "I couldn't say that I would never start again. It could still happen. But I put my life on the line; I don't want to go back inside, I would rather shoot myself." What is essential is to avoid another incarceration. It is not so much a positive decision, the desire to go straight, but a negative one, never to go back to prison.

Furthermore, our subjects stressed the fact that their decision was voluntary and autonomous. They claimed total responsibility and maintained that they alone made the decision to retire: "I didn't go to see anyone else, I decided on my own." "You can't count on others to decide
The decision is not made easily: "To stop, a fellow has to want to get out of it with all his heart." "When a fellow wants to, he can. It's wanting to that's difficult"

Aging

Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) convincingly made the point that there is a direct connection between age and crime. In the case of those individuals who stop committing crimes at the end of adolescence, one can speak of normal maturation. For those who stop during their thirties, Cormier et al. (1965:10) and the Gluecks (1974:169) put forward the concept of late maturation. There comes a time when the offender acquires the ability and control required to keep him from committing further crimes.

At the point when they gave up their criminal careers, the men we met had the impression of having become more realistic, more prudent, and more mature. Their temporal perspectives were broadened. They had evolved to a point where their life ceased being a matter of drifting into a series of disconnected episodes to become oriented toward the future.

According to these men, the process of maturation that takes place with age was accelerated by a number of experiences, some of which had taken place in prison: the discovery of reading, studying, learning a trade, and so on. Reading had been an important factor in the maturing process for some of our respondents. To alleviate the boredom, they used to read in their cells. This broadened their perspectives and made them think.

Backsliding

In some cases, the ex-offender is tempted to commit new thefts. When this occurs it is often because of money problems. Some of them lose their jobs; others do not regulate their expenditures properly and begin to accumulate debts. Sometimes a new crime is committed when the ex-prisoner is idle, bored, and despondent. Many of our respondents told us they tried to avoid meeting former inmates. One of them had even decided to live in the country in order to avoid all contact with the underworld: "Downtown, it's too easy to start again; you meet fellows from the former gang: Want to do a job that pays real money?"

Women and Jobs

Concerning the influence of women, there is no connection between marriage in itself and desistance (West, 1982:101-104). It is rather the type
of woman involved. Some of our respondent’s wives were real Penelopes, waiting faithfully for their husbands throughout all the years of their imprisonment. We were struck by the fact that certain men, at the time they gave up, were looking for a woman whom they described as "responsible". They wanted to marry someone serious enough and strong enough to prevent them from getting into trouble. Moreover, some of these men had found what they were looking for. They had married rather authoritarian women who assumed a large part of the responsibility for the family. In one case the ex-prisoner had married a woman with children of her own. This suited him perfectly because he said, "Having children makes a person more responsible."

We are still slightly perplexed with regard to the connection between having a job and giving up crime. Our respondents did not broach the subject, but when we asked them, the large majority of them told us that they had an interesting job and that it played a role in the decision to put an end to their dubious activities. Clearly, it appears that having an interesting and fairly well-paid job helps a person considerably to persevere in obeying the law. Our interviewees discovered that work is a better solution than crime. "Honest work pays more than stealing TV's worth $800 and selling them for $200. On the other hand, you get fewer "vacations."

The same thing can very likely be said about the family as about employment. Neither has an important role in the decision to stop, but they help the ex-offender a great deal in his effort to resist the temptation to commit new crimes. An interesting job and satisfying family ties give meaning to life and provide an incentive for respecting the law. One avoids acting out in order to keep one's family and one's job.

Conclusion

It is somewhat paradoxical that in this analysis we rediscover some key concepts in criminology: aging, deterrence, the bond, differential association. The study of the abandonment of crime calls for recapitulation of the genesis of criminal habits in reverse. Like rolling a film backward, we see the aging offender take the threat of punishment seriously, reestablish his links with society, and sever his association with the underworld.

Considering the narrow confines of our empirical data, it is scarcely necessary to point out that this analysis is rather speculative. To our knowledge there is not one quantitative research study on the reasons for desistance. By contrast, studies on the origins of crime number in the hundreds. We should take cognizance of our ignorance of a question that, after all, has both theoretical and practical importance. Any assistance offered an adolescent enjoying the full glory of delinquency is bound to
fail. Its chance of being accepted would be much greater at the point where the adult offender is already considering retirement. In the latter case, we are not fighting against the odds. A burglar Maguire (1982) interviewed gave evidence of this:

A 34-year-old man bitterly pointed out the ironical fact that, when younger, he had been given probation or other "rehabilitative" sentences, but having no wish to end his criminal career, he treated them as a joke. Now, when he was thinking more seriously of retiring from crime, he was "written off" by the penal system as a habitual criminal and "automatically" given prison sentences for relatively minor offences, receiving no help or encouragement from anybody. (Maguire, 1982:89)

Obviously, the decision we have described here is not the only one. Our analysis refers to the man deeply involved in crime who, around the age of 30, finds the strength and resources to change his way of life. There could be other eventualities—that of the occasional offender who drifts effortlessly out of crime just as he drifted into it; that of the burglar who, after a succession of misadventures while doing jobs, becomes disgusted and quits (Clark and Cornish, 1985); that of the aging recidivist, tired and worn out, who nearing his fifties, gives up and gradually deteriorates; that of the author of a crime of passion—in which case the question of abandonment does not arise, for such a tragic event can hardly become a habit.

It has become quite fashionable lately to do research on criminal careers, and it is encouraging to see a rediscovery of the fact that crime does have a temporal dimension. This means that there is a story to tell about criminal lives. A good part of these stories are bound to be sad, portraying the struggle of losers. The criminal scene does have some positive sides, however. As we saw, it happens more often than not that these stories have a happy ending.

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