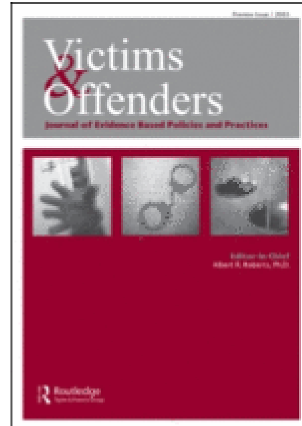

Offenders' Narratives on Criminal Desistance While Serving a Prison Sentence

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Offenders' Narratives on Criminal Desistance While Serving a Prison Sentence

Abstract

This study analyzes the early desistance narratives of a sample of 44 male offenders, between 20 and 50 years old, incarcerated in Spain for serious crimes. In particular, two types of the inmates' stories are evaluated: 1) their narratives of personal change towards a non-criminal life (identity change, perceived self-efficacy and willingness for desistance); 2) their perceptions on those transitional or facilitator factors for desistance available to them (new learning, support and social bonding). Participants' accounts show how many subjects, despite being still in prison, claim to have experienced favorable changes and have different facilitating factors to abandon their previous criminal life. Despite this, such early narratives of withdrawal are not exempt from ambivalences and contradictions, both between subjects and within subjects. The process of desistance and their contradictions was interpreted, in accordance with the reviewed literature, as a long journey which is often traversed in a circular and zigzagging manner. Finally, it has been discussed how the correctional system should play a major role in facilitating the personal changes and the social support necessary for the ex-offenders' journey to desistance to be successful.

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Offenders' Narratives on Criminal Desistance While Serving a Prison Sentence

Criminal desistance is a topic of increasing scientific relevance (Abeling-Judge, 2017; Stone, 2019). Traditionally, in order to know crime persistence, criminological studies analyzed the group recidivism of different samples of offenders. From these studies, an average recidivism rate of 50% has been estimated (Zara & Farrington, 2016). However, such quantitative analysis is clearly insufficient because it does not account for the specific factors, whether internal or external, linked to desistance from crime (Polascheck, 2016). For this, not only quantitative methods, focused on groups, but a more qualitative assessment approach, focused on individuals, is required (Halsey, 2017; Kirkwood, 2016; Stalans & Finn, 2019; Veysey, Martinez, & Christian, 2013).

The qualitative assessment of "desistance narratives" explores the offenders' stories of their previous criminal identity and behavior, as well as their potential new prosocial identity and expectations (Cid & Martí, 2012; Halsey, 2017; Maruna, 2001, 2015; Presser & Sandberg, 2015; Walters, 2019). It has been considered that for an individual transformation from a criminal to a non-criminal identity, offenders must change at three main levels (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Maruna, 2001): 1) they have to believe that their previous criminal behavior does not define them globally; 2) they have to consider that their life can have a new meaning, which constitutes a *generative motivation* for change; and 3) they have to acquire a sense of *agency* to proactively decide and control their lives.

One central question on criminal desistance is whether it is a specific life event or rather a gradual process (Laub & Sampson, 2003, 2005; Laub, Sampson, & Wimer, 2006; Maruna & Toch, 2005). Until the end of the 1990s, criminal desistance was primarily interpreted as a concrete state, a kind of sudden prosocial insight. However, subsequently Maruna (2001) and Laub and Sampson (2001) conceptualized the withdrawal from crime as a progressive process that involves increasing risk awareness and a growing personal desire for a conventional non-

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criminal life (Farrall, 2002; McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, & Maruna, 2012; Stalans & Finn, 2019). According to King (2013), there are "early desistance narratives", or initial stages of prosocial identity transformation, in which offenders begin to consider stopping their previous criminal behavior and being a different person from now on. Showing early desistance narratives does not ensure that offenders finally stop offending. Nevertheless, there seems to be an empirical relationship between the occurrence of these early narratives of withdrawal and the effective abandonment of crime. For example, Maruna (2001) evaluated retrospectively a sample of twenty-one prisoners, finding a clear association between previous positive views of one's future and actual desistance. Other studies have also documented a positive relationship between real withdrawal and offenders' more optimistic perspectives on their future of getting a job (Howerton, Burnett, Byng, & Campbell, 2009), improving family prosocial bonds (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011) and about de possibility of committing fewer crimes (Doekhie, Dirkzwager, & Nieuwbeerta, 2017; Souza, Lösel, Markson, & Larskey, 2013).

Desistance has been related to different favorable factors both personal (aging and maturation, gender, marriage, motivation to change, new prosocial values, identity change, self-efficacy, expectations about future…) and social (interpersonal relationships, structured activities, stable employment, social context, social support…) (Abeling-Judge, 2017; Shepherd, Luebbers & Ogloff, 2016; Terry & Abrams, 2017; Veysey et al., 2013; Walker, Bowen & Brown, 2013). Regarding personal factors, a critical element for criminal withdrawal seems to be, as said above, that the person experiences a cognitive reconstruction of their personal identity: from the previous criminal identity (increasingly "feared") to a "good identity" (Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, O'Connell, & Smith, 2016; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster, Bachman, Kerrison, O'Connell, & Smith, 2016; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Stalans & Finn, 2019; Stevens, 2012). A clear change of identity towards a non-criminal life,

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and not merely the attempt to avoid the negative consequences of crime (e.g., incarceration), seems decisive to favor desistance. For example, Terry and Abrams (2017) showed, from the assessment of a sample of 15 young delinquents, that those who displayed narratives oriented to succeed in their everyday life desisted from crime in a greater degree than those whose narratives only try to avoid going back prison.

Another personal factor that seems to be critical is individuals' perceived self-efficacy to undertake their identity transformation (Bandura, 1986; Maruna, 2001). For example, those individuals who express greater optimism about their ability to change and greater feelings of achievement tend to abandon crime more than those who do not (Cid & Martí, 2011; Lebel, Immarigeon & Maruna, 2004; Liem & Richardson, 2014).

Concerning social factors, Lemert (1981) suggested that the labeling and stigmatization processes (including involvement in the criminal justice system and incarceration) that usually follow an individual's first offence (primary deviation) may stimulate, through an "in mirror" process, his/her stronger deviant identity and subsequent antisocial behavior (secondary deviation) (Schaefer, 2016; Soyer, 2014). Therefore, one of the main obstacles that may hinder the social reintegration of ex-convicts is the frequent stigmatizing and hostile attitudes against them in the media and in the community (Atkin-Plunk, 2020; Keene, Somoyer, & Blankenship, 2018; Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Moore & Tangney, 2017). In this regard, Maruna et al. (2004) have proposed that the positive social reactions (of recognition, acceptance, etc.) accompanying the initial episodes of criminal withdrawal (primary desistance) are likely to stimulate (inverting the process described by Lemert, 1981) a favorable identity change and a withdrawal from crime (secondary desistance). Indeed, it is critical that those who want to abandon criminal behavior receive due recognition from their significant others for their improvements and advances (Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Lebel, 2010; Nugent & Schikel, 2016; Stone, 2019). That is, ex-offenders are empowered in their

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willingness to give up crime when others recognize their willingness to change and the efforts they make to do so (King, 2013).

Perhaps, the most relevant social factor that encourages ex-offenders' desistance is to receive, not only recognition for abandoning offending, but also the necessary social and material support to do so (Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2017; Buen, Lee & Moss, 2020; Fox, 2015; Laub & Sampson, 2003). This social and material support is what Cid & Martí (2011, 2012) call *transitional factors*. In this respect, the occurrence of a *turning point* seems to be critical. Turning points are those significant interpersonal experiences that are able to initiate an individual's process of identity change (Boman & Mowen, 2018; Laub & Sampson, 2001, 2003; Laub et al., 2006; Martín, Hernández, Hernández-Fernaud, Arregui, & Hernández, 2010; Petras & Liu, 2017; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014; Soyer, 2014). In other words, a turning point may be an everyday life experience with family, work, friends, or other favorable experiences (sometimes during prison stay) that can increase individuals' "social capital" (e. g., better social skills, parenthood, employment, social services, housing) (Doekhie et al., 2017; Finzi-Dottan & Shrayborn, 2019; Santirso, Lila & Gracias, 2020; Stone, 2019).

It has been also highlighted that the social support received by ex-offenders can in turn be a source, probably the most powerful, of social control of their behavior (Cullen, Wright & Chamlin, 1999; Lilly, Cullen & Ball, 2014). For example, Weaver & McNeill (2014; Weaver, 2017) analyzed the narratives of a sample of offenders who were in their 40s (after having committed crimes in their youth and early adulthood). They conclude that the changes produced in relation to their groups of friends, their intimate relationships, the employment and their possible religious ties were critical elements for desistance. Although the types of social relationships and ties adduced by the subjects to stop committing crimes were diverse,

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a common theme connected all of them: desistance was an indispensable condition for maintaining such ties, while continuing committing crimes was incompatible with them.

Weaver (2017) has also documented how, paradoxically, some offenders can become sources of positive social influence for other offenders, favoring their withdrawal. She suggests a certain symmetry between the dynamics of social influences that contribute to criminal careers and those that, contrary, cooperate to criminal desistance. In particular, the co-crime processes that are often critical to criminal onset and maintenance may have their favorable counterpart in parallel co-desistence processes. That is to say, some offenders may reevaluate their current and future lives and priorities under the favorable influence and support of their former criminal fellows.

If the various factors mentioned are taken into account, it becomes evident that the process that leads to criminal withdrawal is something complex and multifactorial. Decades ago, the discussion on offender rehabilitation focused essentially on how to promote the psychological treatment and behavioral improvement of individuals. The two main perspectives in this regard were the rehabilitative model RNR, oriented to risk reduction (Andrews & Bonta, 2016), and the Good Lives model, aimed at the personal empowerment of individuals (Ward, 2002).

However, it has become increasingly apparent that psychological rehabilitation is a relevant but insufficient element for the desistance process. McNeill (2012) has argued the need to also consider three other forms of offenders' rehabilitation: *legal or judicial rehabilitation* (through, for example, the cancellation of criminal records), in order to reverse the negative effects of stigmatization and social exclusion that they have experienced; *moral rehabilitation*, through some form of reparation (for example, the subject' development of a volunteer work) capable of "expressing" to society that this person has compensated the community for the damage caused; and *social rehabilitation* that allows the informal social

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recognition and reacceptance of the ex-offender as a new person, who is able of leading a non-criminal life and therefore deserves a new opportunity. Some practices currently in force for the community rehabilitation of offenders, which can promote their desistance, are the fulfillment of the prison sentences in open regime and, finally, the cancellation of their criminal records. For example, in a previous study by the authors in which quantitative data provided by this sample was analyzed, a statistically significant association was found between serving a sentence in an open regime (vs a closed regime) and the expression of greater narratives of early desistance (Masked for blind review, 2019). Likewise, Adams, Chen and Chapman (2017) showed, based on the evaluation of a sample of 40 ex-delinquents, that the deletion of their records of previous crimes (judicial rehabilitation, in terms of McNeill, 2012) favored their criminal desistance by lowering the barriers to getting a job and by contributing to their cognitive and personal identity transformation. However, these examples by no means exhaust all the forms of social rehabilitation suggested by McNeill (2012), and new and broader possibilities of legal, moral and social rehabilitation of offenders may be explored in the future.

From a theoretical perspective, three main explanations of the desistance process have been suggested (Walter et al., 2013). One explanation considers that desistance essentially results from the natural process of individuals' aging and maturation, as a slowdown in criminal activity usually begins in the 20s (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). A second perspective highlights individuals' formation of strong social bonds and controls (from their partner, work relationships, etc.) due to their normal transition to adult life that also decreases their exposure to criminal opportunities (Laub & Sampson, 2001). A third explanation accounts that desistance mainly derives from individuals' cognitive and identity changes related to their acquisition of new definitions of behavior, social roles and a prosocial self-concept (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Stalans & Finn, 2019; Stone, 2019).

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In general, when people change (obviously, including offenders), they seldom do it in a perfectly sequential and progressive way. Instead, attempts of change usually include advances and setbacks, improvements and relapses, assurances and insecurities, as described by Prochaska and DiClemente (2005) in their *trans-theoretical model* on the influence of psychotherapy. These authors suggest that people, when changing, move through different stages (pre-contemplation, contemplation, action, maintenance) in which sometimes they shift forwards and sometimes backwards until they end up consolidating change. In the particular analysis of offender's reentry, Durnescu (2018) has identified also some kindred stages: prerelease-anticipation, recovery and reunion, activation and consolidation (or relapse).

Moreover, as personal identity and human behavior are related to several dimensions (habits, thoughts, values, attitudes, feelings...) linked to different contexts and social roles (family, friends, work, ...), it is unlikely that personal change will be a univocal process. Instead, it should be expected that partial improvements and contradictions will be the norm and not the exception, and that the changes and improvements will not occur consistently in all personal dimensions and in all contexts. Offenders can display new prosocial values (for instance, favorable aspirations to have a job, a house, new non-criminal relationships...) but at the same time continue to commit crimes. These contradictions could be mediated by interactive factors as the following (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011): 1) the complex process of individual maturation, in which attempts to improve and returns to consolidated criminal habits can alternate; and 2) the sudden and opportunistic nature of many crimes (certain robberies, assaults, drug use...) that can be stimulated, for example, by the unexpected incitement of delinquent friends.

More recently, with this complexity taken care of, different metaphors have been used in order to conceptualize the process of the abandonment of criminal conduct. The most important has probably been the representation of desistance as a journey, with the following

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main meanings (Phillips, 2017): the change of identity towards becoming a "non-criminal" person can take a long time; the journey of withdrawal from crime does not occur in a vacuum, but must take place in the different social and cultural frameworks of reference of each individual; a successful stop-crime journey will often require a guidance and support, such as that offered by a probation officer or other community services (Healy, 2013; Maguire & Raynor, 2017).

The metaphor of the desistance process as a "journey" is intuitive and stimulating, although not without its difficulties. The concept of withdrawal as a journey implies that it would have an end, when the subject completely stops committing crimes and begins a fully prosocial life. However, in the context of desistance, having or not having reached the goal will very often not be entirely clear, neither for the individuals who undertake the journey nor to the experts who guide them (McNeill & Weaver, 2010). In addition, the desisting journey is not (as there are usually journeys) a straight travel, in which one goes to the goal by the shortest and fastest possible path (Phillips, 2017). It may be more a zigzag journey (Weaver & McNeill, 2010) or even a circular tour (Shappland & Bottoms, 2011) that can advance at certain times but in others, given the difficulties that arose, recommence at different points. It has even been suggested that the withdrawal process does not travel a single path, but rather various paths that are oriented to different goals such as the change of identity itself, employment, the resolution of interpersonal conflicts, etc. (Weaver, 2017; Weaver & McNeill, 2010).

Complementarily to the simile of the journey, other more daring metaphors have also been suggested. For instance, the assimilation of the desistance process with the growth of a rhizome, a mechanism by which some tubers such as potatoes take out roots and leafy shoots that provide nutrients to the plant and promote its regrowth (Phillips, 2017, on the base of the classical work of Deleuze & Guattari, 2013). Disregarding the botanical aspect of this bold

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metaphor, its implications for desistance could be the following (Phillips, 2017): the desistance process can be a journey without a clear end, hence the focus of its analysis should be the learning, growth and change processes of individuals, rather than the end of the road itself; given that the subject has to travel multiple paths towards withdrawal, it would be expected that favorable and unfavorable developments would occur at the same time (for example, obtaining a job while still under the influence of delinquent friends), the result of whose interaction is largely unpredictable; rather than seeing desistance as a "knifing off" with previous criminal behavior, it should be interpreted as a process of metamorphosis or prolonged change; attention had to be paid to the growth and change processes that occur in the subject's "liminal space" which mediates between criminal persistence and future desistance (Healy, 2010).

In summary, desistance from crime seems to be the result of a complex and gradual process or “journey” that requires several personal and social changes. First, it seems essential that offenders generate the willpower and a narrative of identity change, improve their self-efficacy, and increase their motivation and involvement with social reintegration (Farrall, 2002; McMurran & Ward, 2010). However, it is also necessary for offenders to receive recognition for their efforts to build a new prosocial identity, as well as social support for community reintegration (King 2013; Maruna & Lebel, 2010). Some of these positive changes can be promoted during incarceration by means of educational, social and rehabilitative interventions but also by transitional factors, as defined above, that the prison system may encourage and support too. Indeed, Cid and Martí (2011, 2012) found in a sample of inmates close to being released from prison that both personal identity changes and transitional factors were linked to offenders’ motivation to desist from crime and to their perceived self-efficacy to do so.

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In any case, ex-offenders must go through all these various "journeys" (change of identity, improvement of their self-efficacy, support and social ties, obtaining employment...) that together can contribute to their personal growth and favor, perhaps, their criminal desistance. It should not be expected, as has been profusely reasoned here, that reaching the goal of withdrawal is in all cases something simple, quick and definitive. But if all these "journeys" do not go, the goal will not even be glimpsed.

In this context, the general purpose of this study is to explore, through the interview designed by Cid and Martí (2011, 2012), early narratives of identity change and transitional factors towards desistance in a sample of incarcerated offenders allowed to go out with periodic prison leaves after serving part of their sentences. For this, two specific objectives are addressed. The first is to assess inmates' narratives of change towards a non-criminal status, including identity changes, perceived self-efficacy to abandon criminal behavior, and willingness and reasons for desistance. The second objective is to analyze the inmates' perceptions about the experienced transitional factors, including new learning acquired from prison interventions, expected social support for abandoning their previous criminal lives, and social bonds and involvement with conventional roles.

Method

Participants

For this study, initially a sample of 60 imprisoned offenders serving serious prison sentences (*Mean* = 7.8 years, *Standard Deviation* = 5.75, range 1.5- 28 years) was randomly selected from three distinct prison units/stages of sentence completion (ordinary regimen, therapeutic unit, and open regimen), at the rate of 20 subjects from each unit. All of them were offered to participate in the research, with 44 subjects agreeing to do so. They were between 20 and 50 years old (*Mean* = 33.11, *Standard Deviation* = 7.92) and most of them were Spaniards (88.6%), plus one person corresponding to each of the following countries:

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Russia, Senegal, Nigeria, Colombia and Venezuela. Concerning education, 43.2% of the participants had secondary school level, 31.8% primary level, 18.2% high school level, and 6.8% had not graduated at any level yet. In the sample, 56.8% of offenders were considered to have a low economic level and the rest a medium level.

From the whole sample, 52.17% were currently sentenced for property crimes (half of them involving violence), 28.26% for drug dealing offences, and the remaining 19.56% for crimes such as kidnapping, aggravated assault on police officers, resisting arrest, assault and battery, attempted homicide, homicide and murder. They were in second and third degree of Spanish penitentiary regime that allow them to go out with periodic prison leaves, or even stay outside prison during the day and come back just for the night, according with the applicable law (Ley Orgánica 1/1979, de 26 de septiembre, General Penitenciaria [Spanish Penitentiary Act], Art.72.1). 72.7% had been imprisoned for more than two years at time of the interview.

The characteristics of the evaluated sample are partially close to those of the global Spanish prison population, which are synthetically as follows: more than 40% of imprisoned offenders have prison sentences of between 3 and 8 years; more than 80% are in the age range 20-50 years; 34% of the inmates have a secondary school level and 57% a primary level (plus 5.6% not graduated at any level; and 3.5% with a high school level); around 54% are convicted for property crimes (some also violent crimes), 18% for drug dealing offenses, and about 28% for other crimes, including gender violence (Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias, 2019).

Instruments

Data collection for this study was made using the semi-structured narrative interview of Cid and Martí (2011, 2012). This instrument allows information to be gathered from the participants about their experiences in prison, their possible transitions or identity changes,

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their motivation and the strategies they use in order to move towards abandoning criminal behavior. The original format of this interview includes asking for information in four major domains: the biography of each offender, his criminal career, his last entry into prison and his transition narratives. In the current study, special attention was given to the last domain, transition narratives, in order to get information about offenders' narratives of identity change, their perceived self-efficacy and willingness to abandon crime. Specific questions referred to issues such as expectations and future projects, difficulties they could face, the decision and reasons to stop committing crimes, perception of self-efficacy to do so, perceived risks and costs, or possible changes in self-identity. Questions were open-ended, such as "Looking back, are there things in the past that you would like to change or that you would have done in another way?", "Do you feel able to stop offending?" or "What/who has enabled you to start the process of stopping offending?"

The responses of the participants were encoded by means of directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Neuendorf, 2017) using narrative categories defined in terms of Cid and Martí's (2011, 2012) formulations. Appendix A provides definitions of these categories, as well as examples of coded statements in each of them. For encoding the *Narratives of change*, three general categories were used (and some sub-categories, shown in parentheses): changes towards a conventional identity (rupture with the past, project of conventional life, and risks and costs of offending); perceived self-efficacy for desistance (perception of obstacles and self-confidence, and personal control to change); and willingness and reasons for desistance. For encoding the *Transitional factors*, the following three categories (and subcategories in parentheses) were used: New learning acquired from prison interventions; Social support (emotional support, care and access to material support, and structural support) and Social bonds and involvement with conventional roles.

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The reliability of the coding process was estimated from an independent double encoding, by two trained coders, of 50% of the interview transcriptions selected at random. A kappa value (Cohen, 1960) of .91 was obtained for the agreement between coders that guarantees the reliability of the encoding process (Landis & Koch, 1977). The few discrepancies observed were resolved by consensus among the coders.

Procedure

A research project describing the study's objectives and methodology was carried out and attached to the application for conducting research in a prison that was submitted to the penitentiary authorities. When administrative permission was granted, the objectives of the research were presented to prison staff, asking for their cooperation in the data collection process. Prison teachers, educators, social workers and psychologists collaborated in contacting the sixty participants initially selected because they already have served part of their sentences and were able to go out with periodic prison leaves, or stay outside prison during the day and come back just for the night. All these inmates were invited to participate in the study, agreeing to do so 44 of them. Prison rules about using the least intrusive procedure as possible to access participants were carefully followed.

The inmates' anonymity was granted verbally and in writing by an informed consent that they were asked to sign before the interview started. Only one psychologist interviewed all participants, as prison authorities allowed nobody else to take part in this process. This psychologist was familiarized with the prison life because she had previously done an internship in prison for a year as part of her university training in psychology. She introduced herself to the inmates as a member of a university research team, independent of prison staff, assuring them that the information provided anonymously in the interviews could not affect in any way their future prison status.

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As recording inmates inside prison, either by video or by audio, is prohibited by law, the interviewer took detailed notes during the interviews that were transcribed immediately after the session, as did Liem and Richardson (2014). Transcription texts were broken into small units of content and each of them was coded in a single and independent category of the category system described above (see also Appendix). Afterwards, statements of each participant in each category were counted as well as the overall number of participants who made statements in each category. However, the aim of the analysis was to go beyond counting to "examine language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

Results

The number of desistance narratives was quantitative higher in the open regime than in the therapeutic and ordinary units of the second degree regime. However, as the nature of these narratives was similar, they are addressed here in terms of their meaning instead of their frequency, as emphasized above. The results of the content analysis of the narratives of all the participants are described below, differentiating between the categories included in 'Narratives of Change' and in 'Transitional Factors'. After each narrative text presented is provided [in brackets] a succinct information on the corresponding subject: crime committed, time of incarceration experienced and age. It has been considered that this information could help to better contextualize the narratives expressed by the various participants.

Narratives of Change

This section describes the main identity changes perceived by the participants in the direction of crime desistance, including Change towards a conventional identity, Perceived self-efficacy for desistance and Willingness and reasons for desistance.

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Changes toward a conventional identity

In relation to the dimensions included in Changes to a conventional identity, it is worth noting that only in a few cases did participants show no rupture with their past (9.1%), no clear conventional life project (9.1%) and no consideration of the risks and costs of offending behavior (11.4%).

Rupture with the past

Participants who were still clearly displaying a persistent adherence to their previous offender role were four. What they said was, for example:

> "If I have to get by on my own, I see myself in the street; I will do what I can to get money, without harming anybody" (Participant 5, sentenced for robbery with violence, 2 years and 10 months imprisoned, aged 43).

These persistent offenders are aware of the negative effects of their past life and behavior, but they do not connect it with a view of themselves as offenders. When the interviewer asked them "Looking back, are there things in the past that you would like to change or that you would have done in another way?", some of the answers were as follows:

> "Of course, now I do see it. I would not have done all the things I have done, like stab somebody for some euros" (Participant 11, sentenced for robbery with violence, 4 years and 2 months imprisoned, aged 24).

And when the interviewer went on "Do you think that you are another person now?", there were some answers such as:

> "Nothing [to change], I have never been a delinquent. I get by on my own in other ways. I want to look forward not backward. I do feel sorry for some things. Anybody can change for better. I am calmer. I am not so impulsive. I have learned to control myself. I was impulsive, nervous, a little unsteady, and unstable. Now I am calm, normal" (Participant 13, sentenced for drug trafficking, 6 months imprisoned, aged 34).

> "Yes, I was a rogue. I did not care about anything and now I am a retired rogue. I am not a saint but I am calm" (Participant 11, sentenced for robbery with violence, 4 years and 2 months imprisoned, aged 24).

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Indeed, this participant does not seem to have broken with his past, as he does not show remorse or intention to change.

People that show a partial rupture with their criminal past (18 participants, 40.9% of the sample), despite manifesting a certain intention to change, do not express a clear distance with their current identity, or still have serious doubts about their future as non-offenders:

> "I went to prison in the place of my brother, because I was arrested instead of him; but he was the one who did it not me. Yes, I do not use drugs anymore. I think about things before doing them. I am sick. I do not quarrel. I only fought because I was sick and my cellmate disturbed me. In the past, I was mean, I did not care, as long as I had drugs …" (Participant 16, sentenced for robbery with violence, 2 years and 5 months imprisoned, aged 44).

> "What I should have done is never to have gotten into drugs. As long as I depend on methadone, I will be the same person; until I get myself off drugs, I will not see things differently" (Participant 17, sentenced for murder, 3 years imprisoned, aged 46).

Sometimes, although there is some intention of change and to distance themselves from their current identity, participants blame others for their own mistakes:

> "Yes, I have changed now I know how to walk in life. Yes, I know how to choose friendships. When you are young, you do not realize who is a friend and who is not, but now I know that my relatives are my main friends. I am the same, but with more sense. Before I did not think about things or consequences, but now I think very much about what I do" (Participant 38, sentenced for robbery, 5 years imprisoned aged 25).

Complete narratives of rupture with previous criminal past were observed in 50% of the cases (22 participants), with participants showing a clear distance between their current and past identities:

> "Seeing another culture and socializing with other people, I consider life differently, seeing the needs of people and how life has led them to prison. I would not change anything about my life, everything has its meaning and I have grown from this… [But now] I'm different; before I was egocentric, I did not care about the risk, I did not think about the consequences and others. Now I am calmer and more calculating, I think about everything before acting" (Participant 28, sentenced for drug trafficking, 4 years and 5 months imprisoned, aged 36).

An added value for personal change is the support and reinforcement received from loved ones:

> "I believe that yes, I have changed, so other people tell me. It is important because it helps me to see that yes, I have changed. Before I was a rogue looking for drugs and getting into trouble. This

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> was my entire fault, but it has caused me many problems and has linked me to dangerous friendships. Now, I am much better, mentally, with goals, thinking about my life. I no longer identify with the boy that I was previously." (Participant 46, sentenced for robbery, 2 years and 1 month imprisoned, aged 27).

Project for a conventional life

Four participants (9.1%) have not yet developed a conventional life project, as they do not identify with any ordinary life role, have doubts about their future and have not defined any strategy for change. To the questions of how you think about the future, what you think you will be like in five or ten years, and what you will do when you are free, some answers were:

> "I do not know, I have not thought about it, I am afraid. I did not think before about changing. I never thought I could serve my prison sentence and not have debts to anyone. I do not know, I would not like to see the future, or say anything about it" (Participant 26, sentenced for robbery, 9 years imprisoned, aged 26).

> "I do not like to think long term, but day to day and that's it" (Participant 34, sentenced for robbery, 4 years and 1 month imprisoned, aged 28).

Most of the participants (47.7%) show an incipient or not very well-defined project for a conventional life, but in some cases, they still show serious doubts about what may happen in the future:

> "You will be broke, unless you get a job in prison and save money for later. Being with my family will be the first thing and looking for a job in the street… working for some time and having a normal life" (Participant 8, sentenced for robbery with violence, 2 years and 6 months imprisoned, aged 21).

> "I have no idea about my future, I see it a little far; when the day approaches I'll think about it. I hope to be fine without drugs and have a good relationship with my daughter and her mother. Meet another person [a new couple], since I would not want to be alone. I do not want to depend on any drugs to be well… because it is my health. To be well, to have work, be with my daughter, to have a normal life. I will go to see my mother (Belgium) and from there I will go to Germany. I do not have anyone in Tenerife. Returning to where I lived before would be negative, because I would have the pressure of gossip" (Participant 17, sentenced for murder, 3 years imprisoned, aged 46).

> "Well, everything is different until I get used to it. I imagine myself with my own house and my own family, more mature; but I do not see it clearly" (Participant 12, sentenced for robbery with violence, 3 months imprisoned, aged 26).

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Participants who have developed a clear conventional life project also represent a significant percentage (43.2%). In this case, they are individuals with clear ideas and goals, who know how to carry them out and feel able to achieve them:

> I will be fine and I will continue with my life. My partner, my children, my parents and me too. Work is paramount to continue with my life. I passed a work exam and I'm on the waiting list. If they called me, I would have a job (Participant 18, sentenced for embezzlement, 1 year imprisoned, aged 48).

In many of the cases in which the individuals express a new life project, even an incipient one, the expression "to have a normal life" appears (see above participants 8 and 17).

Risks and costs of offending.

Some offenders (5 cases, 11.4%) continue to consider the criminal opportunities presented to them only in order to solve family economic problems, and do not take into account risks and costs of crime:

> "Looking at my mother, who has been through a lot, my brothers died ... She is already tired. I do not want anything to happen to her, I would feel guilty. But if my family has a problem I cannot say I would not steal. Not the best option but... "(Participant 16, sentenced for robbery with violence, 2 years and 5 months imprisoned, aged 44).

> "I have been locked up for 11 years. I have lost childhood, youth and I am tired. If I see easy money, I'm sure I will. Yes, money and drugs, the thing on the street is fucked up. The worst thing is to fall back on drugs and then I can end up back here and stay here" (Participant 11, sentenced for robbery with violence, 4 years and 2 months imprisoned, aged 24).

A quarter of the participants (27.3%) stated that they consider the risks and costs of crime only partially or intend to resort to crime only in extreme situations:

> "I see myself alone without my family, not getting the things I am fighting for, my surroundings, the opportunities" (Participant 4, sentenced for drug trafficking, 2 years and 9 months imprisoned, aged 36).

> "[I will commit a new crime only in the case that I have] an economic problem, or a very serious health problem. But as a last resort, only in a case of life and death" (Participant 6, sentenced for robbery, 13 years and 6 months imprisoned, aged 44).

> "It is that you make money today and then when you pay [with years of imprisonment] it is not worth it" (Participant 35, sentenced for drug trafficking, 2 years and 1 month imprisoned, aged 28).

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Nevertheless, more than half of participants (61.4%) have begun to consider the risks and costs involved in their crimes and recognize and regret how much they have lost:

> "Prison has been a nightmare. It is the time that has most damaged me and, on the other hand, has opened my eyes to the fact that either I change now or I'll never change. I have lost a lot with my partner, my mother. I realize that I do not want to be here all my life. Now I am older and I see that my life is gone and I have nothing. In this room, I have more self-control; before I did not care about anything. Before being here, there was more aggressiveness. Seeing me here, I'm tired of jail, I see that life is passing me by, the family too. To achieve the minimum goals, I want to see me in my life and have something to fight for, responsibilities" (Participant 5, sentenced for robbery with violence, 2 years and 10 months imprisoned, aged 43).

> "My parents, I have seen them grow old through the glass, I have lost my children and I am older. Letting myself be led again by bad influences, not knowing how to assimilate problems, consuming drugs. Losing my parents would be very problematic for me. I could not get along with them before." (Participant 32, sentenced for aggravated robbery, 6 years imprisoned, aged 29).

> "Being uprooted. Having to tell my parents; being locked up and asking myself what I have done. Realizing the harm that I have done to other people. Wishing that everything was like it was before. I do not want to go back that way, or go back to previous friendships, or anything related to drugs" (Participant 43, sentenced for drug trafficking, 1 year imprisoned, aged 32).

Perceived self-efficacy for desistance

The dimensions included in Perceived self-efficacy were Perception of obstacles and self-confidence and Personal control to change.

Perception of obstacles and self-confidence

With regard to self-confidence in one's ability to overcome obstacles to criminal desistance, only two participants (4.5%) felt that they lacked such capacity and one stated:

> "I can't understand it; if I see it is easy to steal, or sell drugs, I will" (Participant 11, sentenced for robbery with violence, 4 years and 2 months imprisoned).

Participants who said they felt somewhat capable of stopping their criminal behavior represent 31.8%. In some cases, they felt capable but express doubts or conditions about their abandonment of crime or ability to overcome addiction to drugs:

> "I know that if I overcome drugs I can get there. Yes, now I am not addicted. If I had not needed to consume I would not have done it" (Participant 4, sentenced for drug trafficking, 2 years and 9 months imprisoned, aged 36).

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> “Yes, I feel capable but you never know what can happen to you” (Participant 13, sentenced for drug trafficking, 6 months imprisoned, aged 34).

Fortunately, more than half of participants (63.6%) said that they did feel capable of stopping committing crimes and overcoming the obstacles they might encounter:

> “Yes, it does not enter my head that it can happen again. Nothing can make me re-offend” (Participant 15, sentenced for murder, 11 years imprisoned, aged 38).

> “Yes, I have it clear. The world of crime has to die or be imprisoned, and that it is not for me. I've already been on the street; they've trusted me and I know I can do it” (Participant 25, sentenced for robbery, 3 years and 9 months imprisoned, aged 39).

Personal control to change

Five participants of the sample (11.4%) were pessimistic about their future chances of desisting from crime due to external obstacles and the lack of favorable opportunities in their immediate environment:

> “I do not see it clearly. It will depend on me and my partner and the area where I live, because there, we all do the same things, this is the most problematic” (Participant 12, sentenced for robbery with violence, 3 months imprisoned, aged 26).

> “I find it difficult because of work, the people, how to find my place. What I get depends on me and the opportunities they give me” (Participant 5, sentenced for robbery with violence, 2 years and 10 months imprisoned, aged 43).

There are 40.9% of participants who perceive that they control the possibility of changing but only partially. They consider that changing their lifestyle depends on themselves, but at the same time they feel conditioned and are not very optimistic about changing:

> “It depends on work above all, to have a specialized job. I'm not very hopeful” (Participant 28, sentenced for drug trafficking, 4 years and 5 months imprisoned, aged 36).

> “[Sometimes they are more optimistic] Having health, luck and dedication, with work and struggle. Optimistic” (Participant 47, sentenced for drug trafficking, 4 years and 5 months imprisoned, aged 36).

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Nevertheless, most of the offenders assessed (47.7%) show they have internal control about changing and improving their lives, and believe in their own abilities to achieve change without being intimidated by external difficulties:

> "You have to move your ass, fight it. Yes, I'm optimistic because since I was 14 years old I have been on the street and I've done well" (Participant 1, sentenced for robbery, 9 years imprisoned, aged 44).

> "It's up to me, I'm optimistic; if I do things well, everything is going well. My family supports me and gives me strength to look for the right path. Doing things well and continuing to have their support" (Participant 24, sentenced for robbery with violence, 2 years imprisoned, aged 27).

Willingness and reasons for desistance

More than three quarters of the participants (77.3%) fully agree on the need to stop committing crimes, 18.2% say they are somewhat willing to do so, and only 2 (4.5%) are not willing. These two participants leave the door open to committing a new offense:

> "It depends, because if it is to steal from drug traffickers, I will do it; robbery no. It's money. If I see easy money, I'm sure I will" (Participant 11, sentenced for robbery with violence, 4 years and 2 months imprisoned, aged 24).

Among the participants who show some partial willingness to stop criminal behavior, some still do not admit their crimes, leaving the door open for some "minor" crimes, or the willingness to let crime appear associated with the fear of returning to prison:

> "Yes, despite the crimes attributed to me, it has not been as they say. Now I've been convicted of two robberies that I did not do. I was just walking through the area where they happened" (Participant 13, sentenced for drug trafficking, 6 months imprisoned, aged 34).

> "Yes, at least stealing and drug dealing no. Other crimes, I do not care because it's what I know" (Participant 26, sentenced for robbery, 9 years imprisoned, aged 26).

> "Yes, I have thought, yes I am afraid [to return to prison], which I think I would handle, but you never know what can happen" (Participant 13, sentenced for drug trafficking, 6 months imprisoned, aged 34).

Participants who are convinced that they do not want to commit a crime again and that they have the will to stop doing so argue in similar ways to the following:

> "Yes, I am very determined. I would like [not to go back to crime] and I will; I have not had any problems during my release from prison. I do not worry about coming back here [to prison]," (Participant 6, sentenced for robbery, 13 years and 6 months imprisoned, aged 44).

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> "Yes, I am determined, and I have done it, I have stopped offending. Never forget the past so as not to make the same mistakes; and take into account those little things, stop thinking and communicate with your loved ones" (Participant 36, sentenced for drug trafficking, 2 years and 1 month imprisoned, aged 28).

Participants who express firmly they will not commit a crime can be divided into two groups, depending on whether their reasons have to do with their family (74.46%) or not. Those who talk about their relatives often point out that family has given them much support to feel capable of desisting from crime; that having made their family suffer is what motivates them to stop their crime; or that they regret the time they have had to spend apart from them. There are 31.42% who consider family as the main or the only reason to stop committing crimes, as well as conventional aspects of life such as work, having a future partner, healthy living habits or the value of small everyday things:

> "[I will stop crime] for the suffering of my family; they took me prisoner at the time I had my newborn son and my family was left alone" (Participant 23, sentenced for drug trafficking, 3 years imprisoned, aged 38).

> "Being able to play sports, have healthy friends. By myself, I do not deserve to be here. A couple should have a normal life" (Participant 4, sentenced for drug trafficking, 2 years and 9 months imprisoned, aged 36).

The remaining 68.51% of the participants, although they consider the family important, also value other motivational factors to stop crime. They refer to their awareness of their mistakes, repentance for having caused pain to innocent people or issues related to imprisonment, crime and its consequences:

> "Having to tell my parents (…) Realizing the damage you have done to other people (…) I do not want to go back that way, or go back to previous friendships, or anything related to drugs (Participant 43, sentenced for drug trafficking, 1 year imprisoned, aged 32).

> The experience that I had in closed regime motivated me and I do not want that life; something bad had to happen to me to realize these things" (Participant 21, sentenced for drug trafficking, 2 years and 3 months imprisoned, aged 32).

> "I ask myself if the life I should live is this, I have here in prison; I'm tired of prison but happy to have changed" (Participant 19, sentenced for aggression against the police, 1 year and 4 months imprisoned, aged 27).

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> "To have been imprisoned and to lose years of my life instead of fixing something, what I did was more annoying. If I had thought more about the consequences..." (Participant 45, sentenced for drug trafficking, 1 year and 2 months imprisoned, aged 39).

> "I prefer to be poor in the street than to live in a golden cage. I have lost a lot in life, my youth, the desire to laugh, I do not know what it is to be happy and that is why I know that I will never steal; do harm to other people, ever. The experience I've had and the youth I've lost. I have never gained anything with what I did" (Participant 26, sentenced for robbery, 9 years imprisoned, aged 26).

Finally, 2 of the 44 evaluated people mentioned the fact of not using drugs again as the reason for stopping crime:

> "When I woke up from the drug world, three years after quitting drugs, I said I do not want this anymore" (Participant 6, sentenced for robbery, 13 years and 6 months imprisoned, aged 44).

Transitional factors

This section refers to three types of social and relational factors perceived by participants as critical for their abandonment of criminal behavior: the new learning acquired from the prison intervention, the social support they receive for desistance, and the social bonds and involvement with conventional roles.

New learning acquired from prison interventions

When participants were asked whether they had learned something new during their prison stay, their responses ranged from considering they had not acquired any new knowledge to considering they had learned some new things. Participants mentioned 63 times they have not learned anything new, either as a result of prison interventions (28.57%) or the interaction with prison staff (57.1%). By contrast, participants said 84 times they had acquired new learning during their prison stay, particularly in relation to the interventions followed (36.9%) and the workshops and courses they received (47.6%) (this was not so in relation to mere contact with the prison staff). Participants highlighted the improvement of their educational and work training (33.3%) and the learning of social skills, self-help capacity and attitude change (28.57%).

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Prison interventions

In the lessons learned from prison interventions, participants highlighted first the acquisition of strategies to control their drug use (41.9%):

> "Drug treatment has helped me to have tools not to consume and to recognize my emotions. It has made me think if it is worth consuming, seeing the positive and negative part of drug consumption, that consumption does not solve the problems. This has changed my way of thinking" (Participant 2, 38 years, robbery, sentenced to 3 years and 6 months).

Secondly, 35.48% of the learning derived from prison interventions was related to the reassessment of one's life, as mentioned below:

> "In the Therapeutic Unit, almost everything I've wanted to learn has been learned there. If you propose it, you get it. It has made me change and grow as a person, in values, attitudes to stop using, to better control the aggressive personality I had before. I was a bad person" (Participant 35, sentenced for drug trafficking, 2 years and 1 month imprisoned, aged 28).

Courses and workshops

In relation to the courses and workshops, the participants say that 60% of the new apprenticeships have referred to educational and professional training:

> "I've always been working in the prison's central commissary. I have trained as a food handler, in prevention of occupational risks, and I have taken my driver's license. Yes, to know how the commissary works, the warehouse, of what I had no idea. It's an experience that can open me doors" (Participant 22, homicide, 17 years and 6 months, 41 years of aged).

30% of the new learning mentioned by participants in relation to the workshops and courses carried out refer to an improvement in their social skills, their capacity for self-help and their change of attitude:

> "Personal growth, training in recycling and electricity. Yes, they have given me knowledge. It helps me for the day to day in the street, to know how to relate and express myself better. This has changed me a bit when talking with others, not arguing and solving problems by talking" (Participant 14, crime of theft, conviction of 18 years and 9 months, 31 years of age).

Learning resulting from the interaction with prison staff

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In the case of the learning obtained directly from the prison staff, the most frequent comment by participants has been to consider this has helped them in their capacity to reevaluate their life (46.1%), as stated by this participant:

> "It changed me, I evolved as a person seeing the work of professionals and valuing it" (Participant 4, sentenced for drug trafficking, 2 years and 9 months imprisoned, age 36).

Social support

All participants say they have some kind of social support, with a majority referring (81.6%) to both emotional support, care and material support by relatives, and structural support. A small proportion of them (14.3%) claim to have emotional support and care, but not structural support. One participant (2%) says to have only structural and emotional support, but not care; and another (2%) only structural support.

Emotional support

Participants who claim to receive emotional support usually refer to the visits received during their stay in prison or to people with whom they related when they had prison leave. In 61.2% of cases, this support is provided by the family, mainly by parents, but also by grandparents, siblings, children, parents-in-law, and even uncles and nephews:

> "I have always been able to count on my family. I have always been able to count on 100%, support, everything, always tied together. My parents have been together all their lives, they are young and that also encourages me. My mother and I have always had a special relationship" (Participant 48, public health offence, 17 months in prison, age 26).

To a lesser extent (20.4%), the support comes from, in addition to their original family, an intimate partner. Only 8.2% receive support exclusively from their partner; and another identical 8.2% receives it exclusively from family and friends. One person (2%) claimed not to receive emotional support from anyone.

Care and access to housing

Only two people (4.1%) said they did not have any of these support resources from their relatives. There were 12.2% of participants who affirmed that they would have someone

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waiting for them when they left prison, who would help them unconditionally in the process of desistance. Overall, 59.2% said that some people would provide them with a home or shelter in their home. Up to 24.5% of participants expected to receive from their family and friends, in addition to emotional support or housing, a job offer:

> “When I get out, my family, my parents, my siblings, my children and my wife will all be there. I have work opportunities [because] I have a family business outside. When I leave I will live again with my wife and children. If not in the same place, I would like to be able to go to another neighborhood better for my children" (Participant 15, murder, 11 years in prison, aged 38).

Structural support

Structural support refers here to those formal resources participants perceive they can count on, and which are likely to contribute to their community reintegration. There were 20.4% of the participants who said that they would have the help of the prison professional team (including psychologists, lawyers, educators, social workers, teachers, civil servants, occupational-sports monitors, etc.) and 26.5% consider that obtaining prison leaves or the prison’s open regime was a positive and favorable experience in the progress of their social reintegration, as stated by this participant:

> "I have had sufficient prison leaves for four years. They have all been positive. I think it helps me, in the sense of knowing what's going on outside, of being with my family, of living a normal life and being closer to my freedom. To know what I want now and what I don't want to lose" (Participant 3, robbery with violence, 7 years in prison, aged 36).

There were 34.7% of the participants who considered that both resources (and open regime) applied simultaneously were the best prison structural support. Two people (4.1%) said that they received housing assistance from the Catholic Church. Only seven people (14.3%) said they did not have any structural support.

Social bonds and involvement with conventional roles

This section describes the main social bonds identified by participants, both as informal social controls or involvement with conventional roles.

Informal social controls

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From the sample, 67.3% claim to have some conventional affective relationship (family, couple or children) that either dissuades them from committing crime or motivates them not to commit one. Thus, the main agents of informal bond or control mentioned are the family (referred to in 95.9% of the cases); children (who were mentioned by 46.9% of the participants), and partners (cited by 46.9% of participants) with statements like this one:

> "The support of my wife who has been there for so long, giving me strength and not letting me fall, that makes me not want to be here again and to offend. I don't want to disappoint her, I have to show her that she can trust me, she doesn't deserve to suffer anymore" (Participant 23, drug trafficking, 3 years in prison, aged 38).

Involvement with conventional roles

Only two participants (4.1%) stated that they had no involvement with conventional roles. There were 28.6% of individuals who referred to conventional aspects of life such as having had a previous non-criminal occupation, or having other conventional or prosocial relationships. This non-criminal occupation was a previous work activity in 81.6% of the cases and being student in 6.1% of cases.

Besides, 22.4% of the participants said they had conventional social networks or relationships, which could favor their criminal desistance:

> "Yes, I have a friend who supports me. We have grown up together. Where I live there is great support for that. The group with which I relate I know from where I live. They are good people" (Participant 8, robbery with violence, 2 years and 6 months in prison, aged 21).

Discussion and conclusions

The main contribution of this paper is to show that imprisoned offenders display narratives of personal change and expectations of behavior improvement and social reintegration even when they have served only part of their prison sentences. Their discourses on identity change and desistance are largely comparable to those found in previous research, generally in the case of offenders who are closer to their release (e.g., Cid & Martí, 2012; Liem & Richardson, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Terry & Abrams, 2017).

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More specifically, the narratives of desistance of the assessed offenders are evident in their stories of change to a conventional identity, perceived self-efficacy for desistance, and willingness and reasons for desistance. Concerning change to a conventional identity, only a small number of prisoners continued to feel linked to their criminal role, whereas the majority stated that they were breaking with their previous criminal past: "I have changed"; "I consider life different"; "I have grown out of this"; "I no longer identify myself with the boy that I was previously". Also most claimed to have already been building a new conventional or non-criminal project: "I do not want to depend on any drugs to be well"; "I imagine myself with my own house and my own family, more mature"; "I'll have a job"; "I'll meet another person"; "To have a normal live". Similarly, most participants had begun to take into account the risks and costs of crime: "I have lost a lot"; "I do not want to go back to that way, to previous friendships, or anything related to drugs". These identity changes are consistent with studies showing the individuals' desire for personal growth, their gradual distancing from previous criminal identity, and their increased perception of risk awareness (Bachman et al., 2016; McNeill et al., 2012; Stalans & Finn, 2019).

In relation to the perceived self-efficacy or competence for abandoning criminal behavior, the majority felt reasonably or completely self-confident about desisting from crime: "Nothing can make me re-offend"; "I know I can do it". Similarly, most showed the capacity to change: "You have to move your ass, to fight it"; "It's up to me, I'm optimistic"; "My family supports me and gives me strength to look for the right path". These signs of identity restructuring and self-efficacy identified in the sample are in accordance with previous studies with inmates closer to being released (e.g., Arias, Arce, Vázquez, & Marcos, 2020; Bandura, 1986; King, 2013; Adams et al., 2017; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster et al., 2016). It was also found, as expected from former literature (Maruna & Lebel, 2010; King, 2013; Nugent & Schikel, 2016), that individuals were concerned with demonstrating to

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significant relatives that they had changed and improved, and that they needed their relatives to recognize and "certify" this personal improvement ("I believe that, yes, I have changed, so other people tell me").

With respect to the willingness and reasons for desistance, it has also been found that to initiate a process of personal change and desistance from crime offenders have to have a good reason to do it (Cid & Martí, 2012). In our study, most participants mentioned their family as the main reason to distance themselves from crime. The perception and fear of being incarcerated, the negative consequences of their crime (including the harm done to others), acquiring conventional living habits and the expectation of having a normal life were also elements that enhanced participants' motivation to change and abandon criminal behavior: "I am tired of prison and happy to have changed"; "Yes, I am very determined "; "The damage you have done to other people"; "I will stop crime because of the suffering of my family". As in the study by Weaver & McNeill (2014), interviewees increasingly considered that stopping crime was a necessary condition for maintaining their ties, and that this was not compatible with continuing to commit crimes.

In some of these identity change narratives, there are implicit elements inherent to "transformation" narratives (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Maruna, 2001). For example, offenders express a non-criminal core self when they manifest "I am the same, but with more sense"; "I no longer identify with the boy that I had been previously". They show a generative motivation or vital meaning when they say: "I prefer to be poor in the street than to live in a golden cage"; "Everything has its meaning and I have grown out of this"; "It does not enter my head it can happen again". And a sense of urgency to control their lives when they report: "I change now or I'll never change"; "I am determined, and I have done it. I have stopped offending".

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As other authors have pointed out (Laub & Sampson, 2003, 2005; Laub et al., 2006; Maruna & Toch, 2005; McNeill et al., 2012), our results with imprisoned offenders suggest that criminal withdrawal is not a sudden event or insight but a process towards which individuals gradually evolve: metaphorically, a "journey", or better, different "journeys" that they have to make (Phillips, 2017; Weaver, 2019). It was highlighted by Prochaska and DiClemente (2005) in more general terms and specifically by Durnescu (2018) concerning reentry that, when people change, they go through a series of stages in which they sometimes go forwards and sometimes backwards. Hence, it is crucial that offenders receive social support and recognition for their early desistance narratives (King, 2013) and primary desistance episodes (Maruna et al., 2004; Doekhie et al., 2017). It may favor, through an "in mirror process" (Maruna et al., 2004), progress towards their definitive criminal withdrawal (or secondary desistance). Moreover, to promote desistance, it is critical to foster turning points or positive transitional influences on offenders, both during their prison stays and at the time of their transition to the community (Alós et al., 2009; Boman & Mowen, 2018; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Petras & Liu, 2017).

In this sense, the second specific objective of this study was to explore and describe the favorable social influences, or *transitional factors* in terms of Cid and Marti (2011), likely to help participants to stop committing crimes. When the new learning acquired by participants during their prison stay was evaluated, few participants mentioned that they had learned nothing new, whereas the rest said they have acquired new learning in education, work training, social skills, self-help capacity and attitude change, during workshops, courses or treatment: "Drug treatment has helped me to have tools not to consume and to recognize my emotions"; "if you propose it, you get it… grow as a person, in values, attitudes to stop using"; "I have trained as a food handler, in prevention of occupational risks"; "training in recycling and electricity… they have given me knowledge… to know how to relate and

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express myself better… solving problems by talking"; "it changed me". This result is consistent with all the literature that highlights the need to encourage offenders to increase their "social capital" (social skills, job training, positive parenting, etc.) towards the abandonment of crime (Doeckhie et al., 2017; Finzi-Dottan & Shrayborn, 2019; Héctor-Moreira, Martín, & García-García, 2021; Laub et al. al., 2006; Martín et al., 2010; Santirso et al., 2020; Terry & Abrams, 2017).

In relation to the perceived social support, most participants asserted that they have care and structural support. The emotional support received (from visits in prison or foster care during prison leaves) comes mainly from parents or other close relatives (grandparents, children...) and to a lesser degree exclusively from partners. A small proportion of offenders (just one in ten) said they had no one waiting for them in the community, but more than half of them had someone who offered a place of residence, and a quarter expect to receive a job offer. Likewise, about a third of the individuals reported having, for their return to community, structural support from the prison institution (particularly, help from prison technicians, and granting exit leaves and open regime). In a previous study, we found a significant association between serving a sentence in an open regime and the expression of more favorable narratives of desistance (Masked for review, 2019).

Finally, most participants said that they have social bonds with their family of origin, their partner or their children. They also stated that these bonds were likely either to dissuade them from committing crimes or to motivate them not to do so. At the same time, more than a quarter of the participants mentioned as future support for desistance their previous involvement in conventional activities such as having a job.

As regards the explanations of the withdrawal process (Walter et al., 2013), the results obtained here do not seem to support the thesis that it could merely be the result of a natural process of a person's aging. The observed narratives sustain rather the conclusion that the

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withdrawal could be linked both to the changes in identity experienced by participants (Farral, 2002; McMurran & Ward, 2010) and the social supports they receive and expect to receive (family, housing, employment...) (King, 2013; Maruna & Lebel, 2010).

However, the early narratives described, of identity change and transitional factors experienced by the subjects, are far from being univocal and fully consistent. On the contrary, multiple inconsistencies and contradictions both between individuals and within subjects have been observed. All these inconsistencies on the process of personal change are something to be expected looking at the studies referred in the introduction: from the classic *trans-theoretical model* of Prochaska and DiClemente (2005) to the more metaphorical image of the process of desistance as a kind of "journey"(Phillips, 2017). The offenders' journey towards non-crime is a complex and long travel, often walked in an indecisive, circular and zigzagging way (Shappland & Bottoms, 2011; Weaver & McNeill, 2010) and whose goal is not always visible. Despite this, those who want to aspire to this goal must necessarily undertake the journey with the greatest personal decision and the best possible logistical support: firm motivation, belief in oneself, new learning and skills, personal growth, family affection and support, a job, new prosocial ties ... Only in this way can this difficult journey be enough stimulating and feasible for the happy arrival at the goal of a life change outside of crime.

In all of the above, it is apparent that the ex-offender is the main protagonist of his abandonment of criminal behavior, based on his own awareness and desire for change. But as in almost everything in social life, there is no a single autonomous protagonist. The essential alter ego is here, for the effective social reintegration of an ex-offender, the community as a whole and, mainly, his closer social contexts as well as the mechanisms of control and justice. As suggested in the reviewed literature, the personal rehabilitation of the individual must be complemented by his *legal rehabilitation*, which reverses the stigmatization previously experienced, his *moral rehabilitation*, expressive of his repair of the damage caused, and his

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social rehabilitation, or reacceptance of the ex-offender as a person who deserves a new opportunity (McNeill, 2012). In this way, combining the efforts of those who previously committed crimes and that of the society that once again welcomes them, the journey of desistance will have a greater probability of reaching its goal happily.

The conclusions based on the results of this study are tentative because of three main methodological limitations. The first is that the narratives under analysis are those offered by participants in an interview inside prison. They were randomly selected from those who were at the time in different prison units and that, finally, were willing to collaborate voluntarily. It is possible that those who accept to collaborate had a profile at least partially different than those who did not accept. However, it is more likely that availability at the time of the interview was simply the most determining factor for participation. Furthermore, imprisoned individuals are, in general, eager for someone outside the prison to listen to them. Nevertheless, it has been stated out that the answers of individuals involved in the justice system, such as imprisoned offenders, may be systematically distorted by hiding negative characteristics (Arce, Fariña, & Vilariño, 2015) and falsely assuming positive ones (Fariña, Redondo, Seijo, Novo, & Arce, 2017). Such distortions would be higher when individuals' responses have negative consequences for them, as is the case of a worse prison classification or denials of leave permits. However, in this study inmates were told from the beginning that they were volunteering in an investigation carried out by a university research team, independent of prison staff, and that the information provided in the interviews was anonymous and would not affect their future prison status. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that, under these circumstances, offenders' distortions were minimized and that their narratives mainly reflected their genuine thoughts.

A second limitation is that the early narratives of criminal desistance cannot be compared with actual criminal withdrawal rates, since the participants were still serving a prison

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sentence. This confirmation is out of the scope of this paper, but it might be addressed by future longitudinal research design to assess the actual desistance of the sample after at least two years of follow-up. Previous research clearly points out that desistance narratives do precede the actual abandonment of criminal behavior (Lebel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008; Liem & Richarson, 2014). Presumably, this will be the case of many offenders, as suggested by King (2013), since early confidence in their own change is the beginning of the process of future crime disengagement. However, other offenders may find so many obstacles for social reintegration that their initial confidence will eventually wear off. The participants of this study seem to belong to the first group because they were already in an open regime or had been granted prison leave and could reoffend if they were willing to do so, yet they did not. It is true that in order to leave no doubt in this respect, it would be necessary a follow up which, as has been said, goes beyond the objectives of this study but could be accomplished by future research.

A last limitation has to do with the presence in the sample of five non-Spaniard participants, whose effective social integration or not in Spain could not be determined. Indeed, the social roots in a country can be a critical element in the criminal withdrawal process. In this case, although there is no specific information available on how long they had been living in the country, all of them could speak Spanish fluently and, therefore, it is reasonable to think that the majority had social ties in Spain. In any case, the investigation of the social ties of the foreigners in prison samples constitutes a challenge for future research.

In summary, this study has highlighted how incarcerated offenders have often to travel a long and difficult journey towards desistance from crime. For this, important personal changes as well as social support and re-acceptance are required. Even so, the results presented highlight that many imprisoned offenders show distinct personal changes towards a new prosocial identity while serving their sentences, and that have some social backing to

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undertake their particular journey towards desistance. Hence, a primary task of the correctional system should be, precisely, to help imprisoned individuals to rebuild their previous criminal identity and to obtain the necessary social support already during the fulfillment of their sentences (Maruna & Toch, 2005), so that they can start a new non-criminal life after release.

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Appendix

Definitions of the categories and subcategories used to code participants' accounts, based on Cid and Martí (2011), and examples of quotes for each of them.

1) Narratives of change

1.1. Changes toward a conventional identity

Rupture with the past: The participant differentiates between the person he was before, labeled as offender and related to crime, and the person who he is now.

Quote:

"Seeing another culture and socializing with other people, I consider life differently, seeing the needs of people and how life has led them to prison. I would not change anything about my life, everything has its meaning and I have grown from this… [But now] I'm different; before I was egocentric, I did not care about the risk, I did not think about the consequences and others. Now I am calmer and more calculating, I think about everything before acting" (Participant 28, sentenced for drug trafficking, 4 years and 5 months imprisoned, aged 36).

Project of conventional life: The participant refers to a project of life linked to a job, professional training, partner, family and kids, as well as the will to stop offending.

Quote:

"I will be fine and I will continue with my life. My partner, my children, my parents and me too. Work is paramount to continue with my life. I passed a work exam and I'm on the waiting list. If they called me, I would have a job" (Participant 18, sentenced for embezzlement, 1 year imprisoned, aged 48).

Risks and costs of offending: Opportunities and benefits of offending are balanced against the risks and costs of offending.

Quotes:

"My parents, I have seen them grow old through the glass, I have lost my children and I am older. Letting myself be led again by bad influences, not knowing how to assimilate problems, consuming drugs. Losing my parents would be very problematic for me. I could not get along with them before" (Participant 32, sentenced for aggravated robbery, 6 years imprisoned, aged 29).

1.2. Perceived self-efficacy for desistance

Perception of obstacles and self-confidence: The participant is aware of the obstacles (economic, social, drug abuse) he has to change and nevertheless expresses trust in himself to succeed.

Quote:

"Yes, I have it clear. The world of crime has to die or be imprisoned, and that it is not for me. I've already been on the street; they've trusted me and I know I can do it (Participant 25, sentenced for robbery, 3 years and 9 months imprisoned, aged 39).

Personal control to change: The participant believes that he has the will to change, is aware of his capacities to do well and does not think that he depends on external circumstances to succeed.

Quote:

"You have to move your ass, fight it. Yes, I'm optimistic, since I was 14 years old I have been on the street and I've done well" (Participant 1, sentenced for robbery, 9 years imprisoned, aged 44).

1.3. Willingness and reasons for desistance

The participant asserts firmly that he does not want to offend again, in no circumstance, and that he is worried about entering in prison again.

Quote:

"Having to tell my parents (…) Realizing the damage you have done to other people (…) I do not want to go back that way, or go back to previous friendships, or anything related to drugs" (Participant 43, sentenced for drug trafficking, 1 year imprisoned, aged 32).

2) Transitional factors

2.1. New learning acquired from prison interventions

Prison interventions: Any new learning acquired while serving sentence by interventions such as relapse prevention, therapeutic units, programs for sexual offenders, self-control or drug abuse.

Quote:

"Treatment has helped me to have tools to stop consuming ... and has changed my way of thinking" (Participant 2, sentenced for robbery, 3 years and 6 months imprisoned, aged 38)

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Courses and workshops: Professional training and work programs, in and out of prison, such as formal education (primary education, secondary education, high school), occupational training, and workshops related to employment.

Quote:

"I've always been working in the prison's central commissary. I have trained as a food handler, in prevention of occupational risks, and I have taken my driver's license. Yes, to know how the commissary works, the warehouse, of which I had no idea. It's an experience that can open me doors" (Participant 22, homicide, 17 years and 6 months, aged 41).

Learning resulting from the interaction with prison staff: Knowledge that participants perceive that they have got as a results of their interaction with members of prison staff.

Quote:

"Personal growth, training in recycling and electricity. Yes, they have given me knowledge. It helps me for the day to day in the street, to know how to relate and express myself better. This has changed me a bit when talking with others, not discussing and solving problems by talking"(Participant 14, crime of theft, conviction of 18 years and 9 months, aged 31).

2.2. Social supports

Emotional support: Emotional support from family, partner, children, friendship networks or community networks, understood as signals of love and support in the process of reinsertion.

Quote:

"I have always been able to count on my family. I have always been able to count on 100%, support, everything, always. My parents have been together all their lives, they are young and that also encourages me. My mother and I have always had a special relationship" (Participant 48, public health offence, 17 months in prison, aged 26).

Care and access to material resources: Provision of material resources and care by loved ones or friendship networks, including housing, economic support or job opportunities.

Quote:

"When I get out, my family, my parents, my siblings, my children and my wife will all be there. I have work opportunities [because] I have a family business outside. When I leave I will live again with my wife and children. If not in the same place, I would like to be able to go to another neighborhood better for my children" (Participant 15, murder, 11 years in prison, aged 38).

Structural support: Support by professionals and institutions, including understanding and emotional support, that allow access to community resources, such as granting prison leave and/or open prison regime, economic benefits or housing in church and social facilities.

Quote:

"I have had enough permits for four years. They have all been positive. I think it helps me, in the sense of knowing what's going on outside, of being with my family, of living a normal life and being closer to my freedom. To know what I want now and what I don't want to lose" (Participant 3, robbery with violence, 7 years in prison, aged 36).

2.3. Social bonds and involvement with conventional roles

Social bonds: Informal social controls that can come from family, partner, children or other interpersonal relations and that dissuade offender from committing a crime or motivate him not to do it.

"The support of my wife who has been there for so long, giving me strength and not letting me fall, that makes me not want to be here again and to offend. I don't want to disappoint her, I have to show her that she can trust me, she doesn't deserve to suffer anymore" (Participant 23, drug trafficking, 3 years in prison, aged 38).

Involvement with conventional roles: Having had a previous non-criminal occupation and/or having conventional networks or relationships that are favorable to withdrawal by providing a prosocial context.

Quote:

"Yes, I have a friend who supports me. We have grown up together. Where I live is a great support for that. The group with which I relate I know from where I live. They are good people" (Participant 8, robbery with violence, 2 years and 6 months in prison, aged 21).

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