The role of partners and parents in young persistent offenders’ struggles to desist from crime

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Abstract
This article explores the role of partners and parents of young adult repeat offenders in the process of desistance from crime. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with 22 young adults who had been involved in persistent criminal activity since adolescence but had since stopped. Some, but by no means all of them, stated that their partner had played an important role in this. In contrast, hardly any of them had any doubt about the importance of their parents’ role. We then investigated whether the same views were also found among young adult offenders where it was unclear whether or not they had desisted from crime. Based on in-depth interviews with 21 young adults, we conclude that this was indeed the case except for a minority who continued to offend. This article throws new light on the role of both partners and parents in the process of desisting from crime.

Keywords
Desistance, girlfriend, parents, young adult persistent offenders

Introduction
The aim of this article is to contribute to the growing body of research concerning the experiences and motives of young adult repeat offenders in desisting from crime. It focuses on the role of their partners and parents in this process. With respect to the role of partners, the prevailing view in criminology has been that they can have a restraining influence on habitual criminal behaviour (Bersani and Doherty, 2013; Bersani et al., 2009; Farrall et al., 2009; Sampson et al., 2006; Theobald and Farrington, 2009). However, there has been no such general agreement with respect to the role of the parents of young adult offenders. Whereas the explanation put forward in criminology with
respect to adolescents starting to engage in criminal activity puts a great deal of emphasis on the family, when attempts are made to explain stopping offending parents are not generally ascribed an important role. Despite this, the role of both these groups of players deserves closer attention as we try to understand the process whereby young adult recidivists desist from crime.

John Laub and Robert Sampson (2003) give a fine example of the crucial role that a relationship can play in the process of desistance in their influential study Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives. Leon, who came from a large chaotic family, had by a young age already committed a whole string of crimes. He met his girlfriend when they were both 17; four years later they married. Looking back on his life 50 years later, Leon says: ‘If I’d not met my wife at that time, I’d probably be dead.’ Laub and Sampson presented Leon as one of the many men for whom marriage proved to be the turning point to living a decent life (Laub and Sampson, 2003: 118). This classic insight from criminology was confirmed in various later studies. Theobald and Farrington, for example, concluded that marriage can be effective in promoting desistance among young adults. They argue that breaking free from a criminal lifestyle can often be attributed to a strong woman who demands that he behaves himself and obeys society’s rules (Theobald and Farrington, 2009: 512).

This ‘marriage effect’ is, however, open to question both empirically and conceptually, especially as far as young offenders are concerned. Unlike Theobald and Farrington and others, some scholars have found no evidence for an effect of marriage on offending (Lyngstad and Skardhamar, 2013), while others found very mixed results for cohabitation (Forrest, 2014; Larson et al., 2016; Siennick et al., 2014). There is also evidence that the effect of a partner on offending depends on the strength of the marital bond (Rhule-Louie and McMahon, 2007) and/or partnership stage (Gottlieb and Sugie, 2018) and that only prosocial partners will have a positive effect (Van Schellen et al., 2012). It is also questionable whether this approach does not overemphasize the idea that a person who had been involved in criminal activity and then stops is someone who has little agency when it comes to changing his life (Copp et al., 2019; Giordano et al., 2007). An entirely different kind of question concerns what love and relationships mean now at the beginning of the 21st century. Do they play the same critical role as that which Laub and Sampson, Theobald and Farrington and other authors found for their populations? After all, Leon and the other respondents of Sampson and Laub got mixed up in crime as adolescents in the 1930s. The respondents in the research conducted by Theobald and Farrington were born in the early 1950s and got involved in criminal activities from the mid-1960s. Given the distance in time, the question needs to be asked what these findings have to say about young men who were not even born then, indeed who only became adults early in the 21st century (King et al., 2007: 58; Savolainen, 2009: 285; Ziegler et al., 2017: 33).

The period since the turn of the century has been marked by a strong trend toward individualism. There has been a distinct focus on personal development coupled with more doubt and uncertainty about love and romantic relationships and what form they should take (Andersson and Philipov, 2002; Lesthaeghe, 2010; Plug et al., 2003). Even when a relationship seems to be secure, various traditional steps in the relationship, such as living together, getting married and starting a family, are often postponed much longer
(Meeus and Dekovic, 1995). Fewer young adults get married or they marry later; cohabitation is more popular and is commonly seen as an expression of an aspiration to hold on to one’s own identity for longer. Does this trend toward individualism still give partners scope to ‘monitor’ delinquent and risk-taking behaviour? (Savolainen, 2009: 286). Is it not likely that the ‘good marriage effect’ is becoming less self-evident, because the mutual control has generally become less strict – partners keep their own friendship groups and arrangements – and because cohabiting couples are more likely to separate when one partner is confronted with behaviour which disturbs them and does not fit in with their desired lifestyle? Furthermore, would this trend not be more likely to have a negative effect, reducing the chance of those on the margins of society curbing their delinquent behaviour, as young offenders, addicts and other at-risk young people in particular have less prospect of a steady long-term relationship that could have some form of ‘monitoring’ impact on criminal behaviour?

With respect to the role that parents play in their offspring’s criminality, the research findings seem to point in the opposite direction. In contrast with the emphasis on the family in the explanations for adolescents starting to engage in criminal behaviour (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Patterson, 1982), the family has not generally been ascribed an important role in the explanations for desisting. This can be seen in, for example, the age-graded theory of informal social control of Sampson and Laub that may be considered the dominant explanation of desistance at the present time. They developed an alternative version of social control theory that puts a great deal of emphasis on changing social ties in different life phases, that is in childhood, adolescence and adulthood. However, when it comes to the role that these ties can play in desistance by juvenile and young adult recidivists, they place little emphasis on the specific dynamic of the ties between these young people and their parents, stressing instead the role of education, work and marriage (Sampson and Laub, 1993: 244–245).

Adolescence and developmental psychology studies have shown, however, that children distance themselves from their parents in adolescence, become more secretive, and take less heed of their advice and opinions, resulting in a weakening of the parental bond (Keijsers et al., 2012), but that in early adulthood bonds with parents generally grow stronger again. After a period of exploration and distancing from parents, in most cases they come to occupy an important place in the lives of young adults who start to take more notice of their parents’ opinions again (Schroeder et al., 2010). Is this observation not likely to apply equally to young adult repeat offenders, as pointed out by, for instance, Stephen Farrall and Adam Calverley (2004)?

To get a clear picture of how young persistent offenders experience the process of giving up the criminal lifestyle and what role they feel their partners and parents have in this, we set up two phases of interviews. The first phase involved a small-scale, qualitative exploration of this issue with a group of young adults who had got heavily involved in criminality at a young age but, according to our informants, had since stepped away from that way of life. We interviewed 22 of these young adults, looking back with them on the life that they had drawn a line under one or more years earlier (Weijers et al., 2013). The second phase involved a new series of interviews with a group of 21 young adults with similar criminal records, but with this group it was unclear whether they had stopped committing crimes and where they found themselves in the process of turning
away from crime (Weijers and Van Drie, 2014). In these interviews we were as it were creeping closer to the very moment of desistance. This article reports on the outcome of both phases of interviews.

**Desisters looking back**

It was not at all easy to get in touch with reformed young offenders, especially since there was no institutional category by which we could come into contact with them. Unlike the majority of studies in this field, we did not start with individuals who had spent time in a specific institutional setting, such as a juvenile detention centre, even though almost all of them had done so at least once. As they no longer appeared in police records, in theory they no longer had any contact with the police, the courts or the probation service. Over a period of months, we had addressed all our contacts with the police and probation, asking them whether they had any recent information about or had contact with former young offenders who now appeared to have stopped. Our search led initially to a group of 25 respondents spread over the whole country. However, when we asked questions to check this during the interview, it turned out that two of them could not be seen as true ‘desisters’, because they still appeared to be open to potential financially attractive criminal ‘jobs’. A third respondent was dropped because his offending turned out to mainly involve sex offences, which is a separate category of offending with an etiology that seems to deviate from the average young repeat offender (Leibowitz et al., 2012; Seto and Lalumière, 2010). That left us with 22 individuals who were interviewed in depth.

We designed an extensive questionnaire based on the life-course criminology to explore three subjects (see Van Drie, 2017: 198–200): (1) overall background information (family relations, upbringing, social situation of the family, education, friends, neighbourhood and relationships); (2) overall offending information (first offence, reaction of the parents, later offences, offending by brothers and sisters, father, mother, uncles and nephews); and (3) their experiences with and ideas about desistance and persistence and their thoughts about their future (cf. Hunter, 2010: 2). We held semi-structured interviews, taking space and time to deviate from the list and elaborate if the respondent wanted to say more. The interviews varied in length from one to two-and-a half hours. The team of interviewers was specially trained to ask further questions when interviewees gave too general answers and to make use of so-called ‘markers’ – events in the life of the interviewee that can serve as a benchmark for the organization of thoughts and memories (Weiss, 1994: 77). In this context, a ‘life history calendar’ was created, which can make it easier to recall some situations by taking certain events or stages of life as a reference point with the interviewee (Piquero, 2004: 118). All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and transcribed immediately or very soon afterwards into a verbatim for analysis. A content analysis was performed on the interviews. The verbatims were coded by subject, divided into special classes, broken down by motivation towards desistance and primary influencing factors (Berg, 2009: 352): girlfriend, parents, school, work, social work, probation, human agency.

The offences committed by this group of 22 respondents were extremely varied, but theft, burglary and drug dealing were very common as were street robbery and violence including in some cases grievous bodily harm. More than half of the group had committed
a combination of property offences and violent crimes. The research group comprised two women and 20 men; they had an average age of 23 years; all but one were between 20 and 27 years old.

This exploration opened our eyes to the experiences and perceptions of the young persistent offenders and to the diversity of experiences, motives and insights that can play a role in their considerations when deciding to persist or to stop. We were persuaded of the fact that ceasing to engage in routine criminality was a struggle for them that involved many ups and downs (cf. Calverley, 2013; Farrall et al., 2010; Halsey and Deegan, 2015; Hart and Healy, 2018; Healy, 2012; Nugent, 2017; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). We were also struck by our respondents’ often surprising statements about their relationships with girlfriends and partners and about the role of their parents.

**Partners**

We found interesting signs of the trend toward individualism mentioned earlier and of a qualification of the influence of a relationship on the process of desisting from crime. First, some respondents were firmly of the opinion that their girlfriend had had no part at all in their stopping. One even said about his girlfriends: ‘They had nothing to do with it. You see, I never tell them anything.’ A 25-year-old ex-burglar and drug dealer said that his girlfriend had certainly not helped him:

> When I was inside, I simply broke up with her. If you are inside and you have a girlfriend on the outside, then you have a problem. Especially when they start ringing you and that makes you think about them. The best thing you can do is just to break it off.

At least as revealing was our finding that only two respondents stated in such definite terms as Leon that their girlfriend had played a decisive role in getting them to stop offending. One of them, a 21-year-old man with a whole string of past convictions for theft, knife crime, street robbery and drug trafficking put it very simply:

> My girlfriend won’t have it any more and so . . . She says to me, you’ve had your fun, it’s time to stop. [. . .] Yes, suppose that she actually got pregnant or something else happened, then er, you can’t do these things anymore, you understand? So er, I just stopped right then, with all of it.

While some respondents’ statements gave reason to doubt the importance of a relationship in the process of desistance, half of our research group did indicate that their partner and her social network had been significant, particularly in helping them to persevere and stick to their decision: ‘Then I thought: Wow, I could lose this girl that I really care about.’ A 20-year-old who had been in prison a number of times said: ‘Yes, that was what I found the worst, that I couldn’t see her. I thought, now I really need to stop.’ This role of the girlfriend could be characterized as a ‘catalyst’ in the process of desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; cf. Graham and Bowling, 1995 and Maruna, 2001). The majority of respondents felt that as they got older they got too old for hanging around with the boys on the street and they would rather be with their partner: ‘The time comes when you
don’t want to hang out with your mates and er, you’d rather be with your girlfriend,’ said a 21-year-old. A 29-year-old roughly characterized his new lifestyle as a weak version of Leon in Laub and Sampson’s book:

Boring, yes. I don’t go out anymore, I stay at home. Look, now I sit on the couch with my wife, what I never did before. But it’s a good kind of boring. You’re watching a movie with the love of your life. Not in detention with someone snoring in the bunk above you.

If we look more closely at this catalysing role, however, then we notice that the aspects of a relationship that seem to have played a part in the person desisting varied from respondent to respondent. On the one hand, it appears that for most of those who attributed such a role to their partner it was the emotional support that was decisive. In one case this was reinforced by his mother-in-law’s contribution: ‘She gave me words and she started to cry and I went completely nuts [. . .] and yes, there comes a point when you realise just what you’ve done and that’s when I stopped.’

On the other hand, practical aspects were also often mentioned, such as different ways to spend his time and different social contacts that helped him stay away from temptation. In only one case, that of a 25-year-old former drug addict, did a girlfriend exercise some form of social control. This seemed to be an example of the phenomenon that Laub and Sampson called ‘knifing off’, which can also occur, for instance, as a consequence of moving house and getting different routine activities (Laub and Sampson, 2003: 145). In addition, practical support with all kinds of matters such as looking for work, putting a roof over his head and putting his finances in order were often mentioned. A 27-year-old woman, who had been dealing drugs for years but meanwhile gone back into education, stated that her partner at the time had ‘helped with taking care of the children when I had to study.’ It was not only about support from the partner, but also the social network that came with it. As one of the respondents said:

You come out of prison with your stuff in a bin bag and you’re put out onto the street and left to get on with it! You have nothing and still you have to build a life for yourself. [. . .] My father-in-law sorted everything out for me.

Finally, it should be mentioned that some respondents made it very clear that for them the prospect of getting married was a reason to stop. The most outspoken on this were three young men aged 27, 20 and 19, all the sons of migrant parents. For them there were no two ways about it: if you get married, you call it a day with your delinquent lifestyle or, as one of them said: ‘I got older and then you start thinking. I want a house too; I want to get married. You start to think about your future, don’t you? You can’t be a kid forever.’ Perhaps most typical was the perception that desisting from crime was about ‘no longer being a child’. Stopping for them was associated with ‘being married’ and ‘responsible’.

In short, although according to half of these young adults having a partner had not played a significant role in the desistance process, that clearly was the case for the other half, even at quite a young age. It was striking, for example, that the two young men who were most explicit about their girlfriend being their most important reason to stop were both only 21 years old.
Parents

Our exploration also revealed interesting evidence regarding the role of parents in the process of turning away from a life of crime to embrace a different lifestyle. To start with, some of the young adult offenders stated that their relationship with their parents had been poor for a number of years, precisely because of their antisocial and criminal behaviour and the fact that their parents knew about this and were confronted with it to varying degrees. A 21-year-old drug dealer said: ‘I used to think “Leave me alone”. [. . .] Things had to change before I could communicate with my mother again.’ Another young man the same age said: ‘Yes, things got very bad with my mother, [due to] my behaviour. I was kicked out of the house twice, for two weeks.’ A 25-year-old dealer was also an addict and so could not really hide his problems from his parents: ‘I was seriously addicted to the drugs. And I didn’t want to listen to my father’s rules. So he said: “You’re on your own.”’ Another said: ‘When I was sixteen, whenever my father came home, it was so bad that I could no longer look him in the eye. It was like, he comes in and I clear off immediately.’

Other respondents, however, reported that the bond with their parents had always been good, even during their delinquent years. An interesting finding here was that the crux of the matter turned out to be that almost all of these parents were not really aware of their child’s criminal activities until he was arrested by the police. A 24-year-old recidivist, who had been involved in large-scale fuel card fraud and drug dealing for years said: ‘As long as you keep it between you and your mates, no-one at home will find out. And you make sure that it stays that way. So yes, it’s best not to tell your sisters.’ Time and again we saw this picture of either an open and therefore strained relationship with their parents as long as they remained criminally active, or a good relationship with their parents but one that was based on deceit. The double bind of a good relationship with parents while still being involved in criminal activities on an almost daily basis, having a lot of money, sometimes expensive cars, scooters and clothes, required constant vigilance – such as parking the new car a few streets away and hoping it was not spotted by anyone in the family – and this put the offenders under a great deal of stress.

On the other hand, some parents turned a blind eye, failed to question the offender thoroughly or readily accepted the flimsy explanations they were given. As one former 24-year-old street robber and dealer put it: ‘They did have their suspicions, because I was always walking around in new clothes, expensive clothes. But they never asked me where I got it from because I was also working. So that was always a cover.’ A 21-year-old recidivist: ‘My mother did know, because the time comes when you see your son come in beaming and wearing the latest fashion in shoes . . . I also gave my mother money. (. . .) But my mother is a person who has been so poor in her life that she never once asked where the money had come from.’

Whether they knew and challenged their children about it or not, parents turned out to play a crucial role in desistance. Only one respondent said that his parents had had no influence on his decision to desist from crime. Some offenders explicitly mentioned that they did not want to cause them any more pain or disappointment: ‘Yes, I just saw that I was causing my mother a lot of distress every time I went to prison. That’s the main reason why I don’t want to do it anymore.’ Even more important was that while many of
the desisters did not explicitly name their parents as a reason for stopping, they were still very clear about the indisputable role that their parents had played in them developing the motivation to stop: ‘Because she was completely devastated by it at the time. She aged by two years at that time from the stress.’ ‘I can’t do it now. Because my mother is ill, so I really can’t.’ These parents seem therefore to have had a clear and strong role as catalysts toward desistance. With several respondents the emphasis was less on developing the motivation to stop, but on maintaining it, just as with the role of the girlfriends. These respondents said that their parents supported them after they themselves had decided to desist and that this support was vital in continuing to live a life without crime. The key idea in the narratives of these young men was ‘trust’, as one of the desisters put it: ‘Yes, my mother put more and more faith in me’, an idea that we did not hear in relation to the supporting role of their girlfriend.

Not insignificant but mentioned less frequently by our respondents was practical support, varying from bringing cigarettes and clothes into prison to financial support, help with finding work, providing a roof over their head (whether in the short or longer term) or helping them to find somewhere to live outside the family home. Nevertheless, for the overwhelming majority of the respondents, the most important support that parents could provide in the desistance process was emotional support. This might be about feeling guilty: ‘Because I’ve created lots of problems for him [his father]’, said one 21-year-old. It might also be about fear of losing contact with their parents: ‘My mother said that next time I go to prison, I needn’t bother to phone her or anything. So that’s the main reason.’ ‘My main aim, my main reason was simply that I could have lost my family.’ It might also be about wanting to stop disappointing them: ‘It’s just about disappointing them when I get caught [or] go down the wrong path.’ It might also be about more positive things: the emotional support from parents was especially important because it made clear that, despite everything, they stood by their child, by encouraging him and by always being there when he was going through a hard time. One 25-year-old desister, who was eventually caught after committing all manner of offences for years, said: ‘When I was in prison, I phoned my parents a lot and they said that they would help me if I really wanted to stop.’

Only half of the young adults who had a partner reported that she had played a role in their motivation and efforts to make the break from their life of crime. In contrast, the respondents were without exception firmly of the opinion that their parents had undeniably played a significant role both in motivating them and with practical support.

**The views of persisters, waverers and those preparing for a different kind of life**

These findings all relate to young adults who had not committed any offences for a year or more. We wanted to find out about young adults who were known to have been repeat offenders for a number of years as juveniles but for whom information was lacking about how they had developed in their early twenties. Only by focusing in on this group and thereby getting as close as possible to the actual process of desisting from crime, could we obtain a realistic picture of how far these young adults had taken account of the views
of their partner and/or parents when deciding whether to desist or to persist, uncoloured as far as possible by the inevitable unconscious bias that arises when looking back some time after the event.

To track down such a group we fell back on the large data set that we had gathered some years earlier for a research project commissioned by the Public Prosecution Service of a medium-sized town (Weijers et al, 2010). The prosecutors had asked for our advice on how to tackle young repeat offenders (defined as more than five police records). At that time, we analysed the files of 81 young people, randomly selected from a list of young repeat offenders with an average age of 16 years. We studied their legal documentation to find out how many and what kind of convictions the young adults had. We also studied other relevant files, from the Child Protection Board to the probation service and from the local police officer to the municipality, education and social work, to enable a recommendation to be made that fitted the individual young people’s situations.

To find out whether and to what extent these repeat offenders had similar views on the role of their partners and parents, we started a follow-up study of this large local group of recidivists who were by now young adults (which eventually resulted in a long-term longitudinal study with multiple measurement points). Once again there was no institutional category by which to identify them and, partly for that reason, it was very difficult to get in touch with these young adults. Desisters were not usually very keen to be reminded of this period in their past; persisters mistrusted us at first. Eventually we managed to speak to 21 young men with an average age of just under 22 years. We used the same questionnaire and the same semi-structured interview technique to conduct lengthy in-depth interviews with these respondents (see Van Drie, 2017: 201–248).

All information from the legal documentation, the files and the interviews were combined and compared to prevent our understanding of the desistance process being distorted (cf. Bushway and Tahamont, 2016: 375) and to make it possible to sketch portraits of all 21 respondents (Weijers and Van Drie, 2014). In the coding process, a typology emerged concerning different phases in the process of desistance. That typology was constantly checked per person on the basis of their up-to-date police records and legal documentation. Thus, we were able to see where we were dealing with a genuine desister (who had stopped for at least three years), a clear persister, a waverer who was still offending but had started to have doubts about his way of life or someone who had not appeared in police or court records for some time and was engaged in turning his life around (Weijers, 2020).

Of the 21 interviewees, six were definite persisters. Typical statements made by this group included: ‘Look, I haven’t finished school and I have no job. What else am I gonna do?’ ‘When I’ve got € 350,000 in my bank account, you’ll no longer be troubled by me.’ You do feel better if you quit. [. . .] My last sentence sucked. Had a rough time. But you can best resign yourself to it.’ ‘I would like to stop, but because I’ve not got any work, you soon end up back in crime.’ Another four had not appeared in the police records for two years or more and they had clearly taken specific steps that could be considered to be preparations for a different life. Finally, another six had already desisted consistently for at least three years.
**Partners**

Fourteen of these 21 young adults were in a relationship at the time of the interview, in most cases this was a serious relationship that had been going on for a few years. Three of them had a child. Concerning the role of girlfriends, the first thing worth mentioning is that, according to all 14 young men, none of their girlfriends agreed with their boyfriend’s behaviour. The girlfriends rejected their actions without exception and all of the young men said that their partner had asked them to stop. Here, we see a fundamental difference between the first two categories and the last two.

Both the persisters and the waverers made clear that they did not take their girlfriends wanting them to stop seriously. Sometimes the girlfriend herself was even used as an excuse for carrying on: ‘She’s also better off financially’; ‘We are doing well and she also benefits from that.’ Another came up with a whole argument justifying his stance and in the same breath involved their child in it:

> Look, I have a girlfriend and a young child (of 4) and for me, it’s so important that I always step up to the plate, you understand? [...] I like designer clothes; my daughter likes designer clothes and my girlfriend wants to look nice too.

This account confirms the finding that parenthood does not necessarily have a preventive effect on young adult repeat offenders, but that aspects of parenthood may encourage desistance or persistence (Abell, 2018; Blokland and Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Schinkel, 2019).

All five waverers had a girlfriend and, just like the persisters, were dismissive of their partners’ criticisms for the time being, but they had various strategies for warding off those criticisms. Two of them made clear that their girlfriend had asked them to stop but that she also benefited and so she should not ‘nag’. The other three were a bit less forthright about this and appeared to be leaving their options open. Number three said that he had really missed his girlfriend during his last sentence and so he wanted to ‘take it easy’ so there would be less chance of him having to be away from her for a long time. Numbers four and five, both aged 21, said that they would stop ‘eventually’: ‘If she says that I have to stop hanging around with my mates, or stop committing crimes . . . yes, that wouldn’t be so easy, I’m not ready for that yet.’

We got a much more positive response from the two who were preparing to leave behind their life of crime when they commented on their partners. One made clear that her support was vital to his efforts to lead a different kind of life. The other had got married a few months earlier, his wife knew nothing and he wanted to keep it that way. Finally, just as we found in the narratives from the exploratory study, with the genuine desisters their girlfriends’ objections seemed at least to have helped them to reflect on their lives and above all had helped them to stay on track once they had decided on an alternative course. We saw a clear difference, therefore, in the partners’ influence on the process of desistance, depending on what stage the individual young men were at in their development toward stopping and what they thought about this at the time.

**Parents**

With respect to parental influence, it should be noted first of all that the figures show that 75% of the total group had one or more family members who themselves had had contact
with the police and the criminal justice system. It also emerged from the interviews that their families did influence the criminal behaviour of these young men, at least with respect to how they regarded their own criminal past. The persisters typically had grown up in families in which criminality was seen as normal. One, for example, said that he did not have to feel ashamed about anything, ‘because we have bigger robbers than me in our family’. In short, while their partners were unreservedly critical of the criminal behaviour of these young men, the position of most parents on this crucial point was much more complicated. Even so almost all of the respondents said that their parents – even if father (and uncles or elder brothers) had been in trouble with the police once or more – wanted their son to desist from crime or at least stop acting in a way that could bring him into contact with the police again.

A typical difference emerged here that paralleled the role of the partners, between those who continued to commit crimes and thought it would be stupid to stop and the desisters and those who had clearly set out on a different path and even those still wavering about whether they wanted to continue. Those who had stopped completely or had taken steps in that direction some time ago, took their parents’ criticisms seriously and the waverers did at least listen to their warnings. In contrast, the persisters firmly rejected any advice to stop. At most they took on board their parents’ suggestions that they at least consider specializing in different offences – by that read dealing and handling. It appeared that the parents were not only motivated by the confrontations with the police and the judiciary. It was clear from the young men’s accounts that, while their sons generally did not care about their future, the parents were increasingly concerned about their increasing debts due to fines, damages and unwise spending. The persisters, however, showed themselves to be completely unmoved by all objections, as some young men said: ‘it goes in one ear, out the other’. All the persisters made clear that they thoroughly disliked being ‘preached’ at by their parents: ‘You know what?’, a persister told us about his mother’s reaction, ‘I can’t handle that preaching. One moment she’s in the kitchen, then she keeps coming into the living room and screaming at me and she does that all day long!’ According to the persisters and the waverers, their parents were being a nuisance. With such a ‘hysterical’ mother they could not relax in the house, so they obviously ‘just went out on the street’ again.

We found a typical difference, therefore, between the upbringing of and guidance given to those who were simply carrying on with their criminal ways and those who had embarked on a different path or perhaps merely acknowledged that they could not continue with what they had been doing. The picture that emerged from the accounts of the persisters was that their parents had often given up correcting them once their sons reached the age of 16 to 18. It is not unconceivable that some parents from this age on were actually scared of their criminal son and his aggression. However, it was also clear that mothers especially were often afraid of something else, and that was of losing their son entirely. While the fathers had often given up on their sons from the age of about 16 due to their antisocial behaviour, at least that was how the sons saw it, it was clear from the interviews that for these young men it was the contact with their mothers that mattered most to them. There is a reason why mothers usually constitute a large and reliable proportion of prison visitors (cf. Comfort, 2003). Because of their fear of losing their son entirely, some mothers tried to ignore or even deny his criminal behaviour when he
reached the age of 16 or 17 years. Striking was the fact that most sons for their part also did their best to keep the bond of trust between them and their mothers. Occasionally, he would tell her something, just enough to give her the idea that he trusts her, and only her. As long as the boys persisted with lawbreaking, they were playing that game for purely instrumental reasons. The mothers would gratefully hold on to the thought that their sons trusted them and that whatever happened, they would not lose them altogether.

At the same time, it became clear to us that parental support — practical, moral and emotional — played an important role for those who wanted to change. It affected both the way they reflected on their life and their motivation to live differently, and their sense that they had enough strength to make the break away from their delinquent lifestyle and not to relapse. One young man who had only just begun to have doubts about his way of life was typical. On the one hand, when talking about his criminal activities he said: ‘Of course, you always get a kick from it.’ On the other hand, he had realised meanwhile what his parents — actually his mother once again — had been through all these years, a sentiment that we never heard from the persisters: ‘When I’m inside and I see my mother crying, then I think enough is enough.’ That is an entirely different story from the persister quoted earlier who just found his mother a nuisance with her ‘preaching’. This applied even more strongly to those who, sometimes after faltering along the way, were already following a new path. One of them, for example, explained that he absolutely did not want to see his mother when he was in prison: ‘I know that if I see her in here, then when she goes, I’ll feel absolutely rotten. When you think: my mother has such faith in me and then . . . then it breaks your heart.’

**Conclusion**

Regarding the role of partners, our exploration led to the conclusion that being in a relationship can be an important factor when a young man is struggling to put an end to his criminal lifestyle at least in some cases. More interesting was the finding in our local follow-up study that, according to our respondents, all of their girlfriends rejected the criminal activities of these young men but that their criticism made little impression on them. That led us to conclude that the idea of the crucial chastening role of the girlfriend did not apply to the active persisters who were still fully involved in and committed to their criminal lifestyle. Even more interesting was our finding that this also applied to the waverers who, even though they had come to acknowledge the drawbacks of their lifestyle, still could not envisage a feasible alternative path for themselves. They made clear that they were not yet ready and willing to give up their income source for their girlfriend (nor for their kids).

Insofar as the desisters mentioned a girlfriend, they seemed to take their relationship more seriously. It is difficult to estimate what weight should be given to this finding, however, because the desisters had become more serious with respect to every aspect of their lives: they were taking more responsibility, looking ahead and taking other people into account. It is unclear, therefore, whether the girlfriends played an important role in this process in themselves, or whether the respondents were taking them more seriously because they had adopted a more mature attitude in general (cf. Lyngstad and Skardhamaer, 2010: 236).
With regard to the role of girlfriends, we conclude that only in very rare cases would a young repeat offender stop because of his girlfriend, certainly if he was a typical obstinate persister or even a waverer. On the other hand, we found clear examples of girlfriends who did play a role in helping them to change their lifestyle, according to the young offenders and ex-offenders. That applied both to those who had just made the first steps toward changing their lifestyle and to those who had desisted quite some time ago. It would seem likely, therefore, that a secure, lasting relationship could indeed have some positive influence on a young repeat offender, but then not so much on the decision to desist but more on maintaining the motivation to stick to a new, pro-social lifestyle, once the young man himself had decided to stop and had set out on the new path.

With regard to the role of parents, we conclude first of all that, both in the exploratory study and in the local follow-up study, they appeared to play a more pivotal role in many cases in the struggle of these young adults to change their lifestyle, to break with their old friends of the street and to desist from crime. Our longitudinal study revealed that parents appeared to play this role despite the fact that in many cases the situation at home during these young men’s childhoods had been chaotic and unstable, and despite the fact that many fathers (and other family members) had been involved with the police themselves. While their parents were to say the least ambivalent about the criminal lifestyle, all of the desisters without exception made clear that they leaned heavily on their parents in the process of desisting from crime. We found a similar picture among those who had decided to stop and had already taken some steps in the direction of a different way of life. Even more important seems to be the fact that some waverers, as well as both the young adults who were clearly preparing to stop and the stable desisters, realized what misery they had caused their parents with their lifestyle.

The persisters felt hardly any remorse, even towards their parents. One waverer reported that he felt sorry occasionally but that he suppressed that feeling. The preparers, on the other hand, without exception admitted straight away to feelings of remorse and shame towards their family. We can conclude that as long as the young repeat offenders continued to offend, they were not concerned about the worries of their parents. This also held for the individuals who acknowledged the downsides of their criminal lifestyle. We conclude that as a rule of thumb, as long as young recidivists keep offending, they are almost without exception blind to the painful consequences for their parents. While it was true that feelings of remorse only seemed to be an explicit motive for stopping in some cases, still, the slowly dawning realization of the suffering they had caused their parents, while these same parents kept on supporting them as best they could, made it easier to distance themselves from their past, take responsibility for their lives and take the difficult step to adulthood. It was striking how often the bond with mothers was mentioned here by the respondents. Here, we see a striking difference with the role of the partner. Insofar as the girlfriend played a role in the considerations of these young men, that was predominantly in the sense of a disadvantage of continuing for the young man himself, namely that he should miss her again if he got detained. Regarding the parents, however, there is a completely different motive, namely the (finally breaking through) awareness of the misery that going on with crime meant for them.

We found a subtle but interesting difference between the two research groups on this point. Explicit references to their parents as the ‘main reason’ for stopping, which
emerged from among the desisters in the exploratory study, were only expressed by one or two of the subjects in the longitudinal study. In general, they did not desist from their criminal lifestyle on account of their parents any more than they did for their partners. Here, we see the importance of desistance research ‘while it is taking place’: the younger the subjects and the closer you get to the moment of stopping, the less parental input counts. The more adult and empathetic they are and the greater the distance from their criminal past, the more they realise what misery their old lifestyle had meant for the parents, the more they value the bond with their parents and the more they see that as a decisive factor after the event.

From this perspective, it is important to realise that the efforts of the mother who, despite everything, does not want to lose her son finally ‘pay off’. If the young man sees the error of his ways at some point, reconciliation with his parents and the prospect of a different life are not entirely out of the question facilitated by the bond cherished by her. These findings suggest that parents and, in particular, the mothers of young adult repeat offenders can play an important role in their finding a way back to a well-adjusted life. But they can only play that role once the young adult has begun to realise what misery his criminal lifestyle has brought to his parents. This could offer an opportunity for probation work. It looks as if the probation officer would do well to encourage the budding capacity for empathy of the young adult and to reinforce his awareness of the pain that his conduct has given his parents. In that way, the officer will not only help the young adult but will also support the parents in their difficult situation.

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