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# Subjective Desistance and the Transition to Adulthood

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This article introduces two new conceptualizations of desistance based on individuals' personal assessments of their own movement away from crime. Drawing on qualitative accounts of changes in offending, survey items indexing subjective desistance and reference group desistance are developed. A representative community sample of young adults is used to compare these new conceptualizations of desistance against more established measures derived from changes in arrest and self-reported crime. Results indicate that the prevalence and predictors of desistance vary with these alternative conceptualizations. Although relationship quality is consistently related to each desistance measure, the effects of prior crime, peer relationships, race, gender, and parental status depend on the outcome under consideration. These results show both the generality of the desistance process and the utility of comparing subjective accounts of this process alongside official and self-reported behavioral measures.

**Keywords:** *desistance; subjective; life course; self-report*

As articles in this special issue make clear, the significant conceptual breakthroughs and powerful empirical studies in recent years have increased our understanding of the process of desistance from crime (for a comprehensive review, see Laub & Sampson, 2003). Yet the field has unevenly developed with regard to both theory and measurement. This article seeks to build on past developments and push the boundaries of desistance research in two ways. First, survey items are developed to tap into the subjective accounts of desistance that emerge powerfully in qualitative research (Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996). Second, we extend desistance research beyond officially defined delinquent populations to consider movement away from crime among a more representative community sample.

Like deviance, desistance is a relative conception that extends well beyond those incarcerated or otherwise labeled delinquent. Following Travis Hirschi's (1969) use

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of a general community sample to explicate his social control theory of delinquency, desistance researchers may similarly benefit by looking to broad, representative samples to explain the general decline in delinquency with age. As Emile Durkheim (1895/1982) noted long ago, even in a “society of saints” where serious crime is unknown, people are judged and judge themselves as more or less deviant in relation to their peers. Extending this logic to life course criminology, even “saintly” individuals experience greater and lesser involvement in delinquency at different stages of life.

A general model of desistance should explain the cessation or diminution of offending that occurs among “secret deviants” (Becker, 1963) and among those who have received a formal deviant label. For those whose activities have escaped the attention of law enforcement, it makes little sense to base desistance measures on the continued absence of a criminal record. Instead, a model that emphasizes behavioral changes, or subjective assessments of movement away from crime, provides a more meaningful reference point.

The development of a general model of desistance to explain the steady movement away from antisocial behavior would constitute an important contribution to life course research, in part by generalizing and validating extant work. For example, adult status markers such as employment and family relationships appear to be linked to desistance among the general population and officially defined delinquents alike (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen, 2000; Warr, 1998). More generally, what is the relationship between movement away from illicit behavior and other indicators of adult status, such as having children, educational attainment, and civic participation? This article seeks to inform such questions by examining a range of desistance measures among a representative sample of individuals.

Desistance is generally examined using one of three general measurement approaches, each with different strengths. The preponderance of recent research in the area examines changes in arrest, conviction, or incarceration over time (e.g., Le Blanc & Loeber, 1998). Some researchers in this tradition then examine the relationship between offending trajectories and biological processes of aging, or social processes such as marriage. These studies provide invaluable information but are subject to biases associated with law enforcement priorities, errors in reporting, and criminal justice administration.

A second measurement approach uses narratives or interviews to describe and explain the movement away from crime (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996). These methods offer rich detail about the process of desistance as it is experienced. Individuals provide stirring subjective accounts of their movements away from crime in their own words and their difficulties overcoming barriers to reentry and reintegration. Although interviews can offer greater depth and insight from first-person accounts of movement away from crime, generalizing the results beyond the interviewed sample can be problematic.

A third approach uses survey methodology to examine self-reported changes in delinquent behavior (Massoglia, 2006; Warr, 1998). As with other approaches, surveys

also endeavor to study how patterns of offending change over time and to estimate the extent to which life course characteristics such as gainful employment and family formation engender movement away from crime. Self-report surveys are likely to be more generalizable than small-scale qualitative studies and less subject to the biases of the criminal justice system than administrative records or official statistics. Nevertheless, few surveys contain information that would allow researchers to triangulate and validate the data derived from official, self-reported, and subjective measures.

The present study extends the survey approach to ask questions about desistance that have typically been reserved for qualitative studies. Specifically, we develop survey items to assess individuals' subjective sense of change in their own delinquent behavior over time. We use the term *subjective desistance* to characterize respondents' self-reports of whether they are involved in more, less, or approximately the same amount of a series of delinquent activities, relative to their behavior 5 years ago. A second subjective measure, *reference group desistance*, asks respondents whether they are involved in more, less, or approximately the same amount of these delinquent activities relative to others their age. These conceptualizations of desistance stress respondents' perceptions of movement away from crime and tap into two criminologically important arenas: changes in individual behavior over time and differences in behavior relative to same-age peers.

## Data and Measures

To assess these alternative measures of desistance, we analyze data from the Youth Development Study (YDS; see Mortimer, 2003). The YDS is a longitudinal survey of 1,000 students who attended Saint Paul, Minnesota, public schools in the 1980s. Since 1988, when respondents were freshmen in high school, they have reported information about their school, work, family activities, civic participation, and delinquent involvement. Descriptive statistics for the variables to be analyzed are presented in Table 1. The sample is approximately 75% White and approximately 43% male. By 2002, approximately 45% of respondents were married and 55% had children. The YDS remains generally representative of the Saint Paul cohort from which it was drawn, although sample attrition has been somewhat greater among racial minorities and more disadvantaged respondents (for details on panel attrition in the YDS, see Mortimer, 2003, pp. 37-43). In the 2002 wave of data collection, when most respondents were 29 to 30 years of age, a battery of questions designed to analyze desistance and the transition to adulthood was developed and included in the survey.

Because these new desistance measures are untested, we introduce them alongside more traditional or established indicators. The YDS survey includes self-reported measures of criminal behavior and arrest, spanning from high school to age 30. This

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Description	Coding	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Desistance measures				
Subjective	Compared to 5 years ago, do you now do more, less or about the same amount of these activities?	0 = more or same, 1 = less	72%	0.45
Reference	Compared to other people your age do you think you do more, less, or about the same amount of these activities?	0 = more or same, 1 = less	61%	0.49
Behavioral	Moderation or cessation of self-reported drunk driving, theft, and violence in past 3 years	0 = more or same, 1 = yes	47%	0.50
Official	Zero arrests in past 3 years	0 = arrested, 1 = not arrested	94%	0.23
Background				
Male	Self-reported sex	0 = female, 1 = male	44%	0.50
White	Self-reported race	0 = Other, 1 = White	75%	0.44
Prior crime				
Youth self-reported crime	Self-reported crime through 1998, reported at 24 to 25 years of age	Scale of theft, drunk driving, vandalism, and violence items	5.36	2.30
Youth arrest	Arrest through 1998, reported at 24 to 25 years of age.	0 = no, 1 = yes	21%	0.41
Adult bonds				
Work quality	The respondent's current job is related to long-term career goals	0 = no, 1 = yes	60%	0.49
Work friends	How often respondents get together with friend from work off the job.	0 = infrequent socializing, 1 = socializing	23%	0.42
Relationship quality	Respondent's satisfaction with relationship and importance of partner	1 = satisfied with partner and relationship is important, 0 = else	56%	0.50
Children	Presence of children	0 = no, 1 = yes	56%	0.50

Note: Desistance rates in Table 1 represent those observed for the full sample. Desistance rates in Figure 1 represent those observed for those at risk of desistance by virtue of prior delinquency.

study takes advantage of the longitudinal design of the YDS to measure desistance in four different ways. We follow Uggen and Kruttschnitt's (1998) distinction between *official* desistance, as measured by arrest, and *behavioral* desistance, as measured by self-reports. The official measure codes individuals as desisting if they

report arrests earlier in the life course but have remained arrest free for at least 3 years. Behavioral desistance is measured through changes in respondents' self-reported substance use, theft, and violence. Individuals who have desisted behaviorally reported being involved in crime at earlier points in the life course, but have ceased or moderated—based on self-reported survey data—their reported illicit behavior during the preceding 3 years.

Reference group desistance is assessed relative to same-age peers, using items with the following wording: “Compared to other people your age do you think you do more, less, or about the same amount of these activities.” The specific activities enumerated include partying, breaking work rules (e.g., “calling in sick when I’m not really sick”) and breaking other rules (e.g., driving after excessive drinking). Subjective desistance uses the same behavioral indicators, but asks individuals, “Compared to 5 years ago, do you now do less, more, or about the same of these activities?” Individuals are coded as reference group desisters if they report fewer of these activities than others of their age and are coded as subjective desisters if they report less crime at the most recent wave of data collection (measured at age 29 to 30) than 5 years earlier.

We recognize that some of the activities (e.g., “partying”) in our desistance measures capture behaviors that is potentially problematic or antisocial but not explicitly illegal. The subjective and reference group indicators are therefore not directly comparable with the arrest and behavioral indicators.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, we cannot estimate the prevalence of desistance based on an identical set of behavioral activities, although such an effort would be an informative and useful exercise. In this article, however, we attempt to show how desistance looks from a variety of vantage points, including different referents, activities, and data collection procedures. Despite these caveats, we should note that the behavioral range encompassed in our desistance indicators is generally comparable to that of other studies.

In addition to demographic variables and four different conceptualizations of desistance, the YDS offers a basic set of predictors that prior research has linked to desistance. In particular, the YDS includes indicators of relationship quality (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Respondents are coded as having high relationship quality if they report being satisfied with their current relationship and if activities with their partner are important to them. Work commitment measures whether the respondents' jobs are related to their long-term career goals. Individuals who report that their job is related to their long-term career goal, either because it will continue as their career or because it provides skills directly related to their career, are coded as 1 on work commitment. As a final measure of social bonds, the study also indicates whether respondents have children. To assess peer effects, the survey inquires about how often respondents socialize with their work friends while away from the job. Individuals who report getting together with work friends at least two or three times per month are coded as 1. Finally, as mentioned above, these data include indicators of prior arrests and self-reported crime, the latter indexed by a summary scale of high school theft, drunk driving, vandalism, and violent behavior. In sum, the YDS

offers longitudinal data on crime, deviance, and the markers of adult status most closely associated with desistance.

## Current Focus

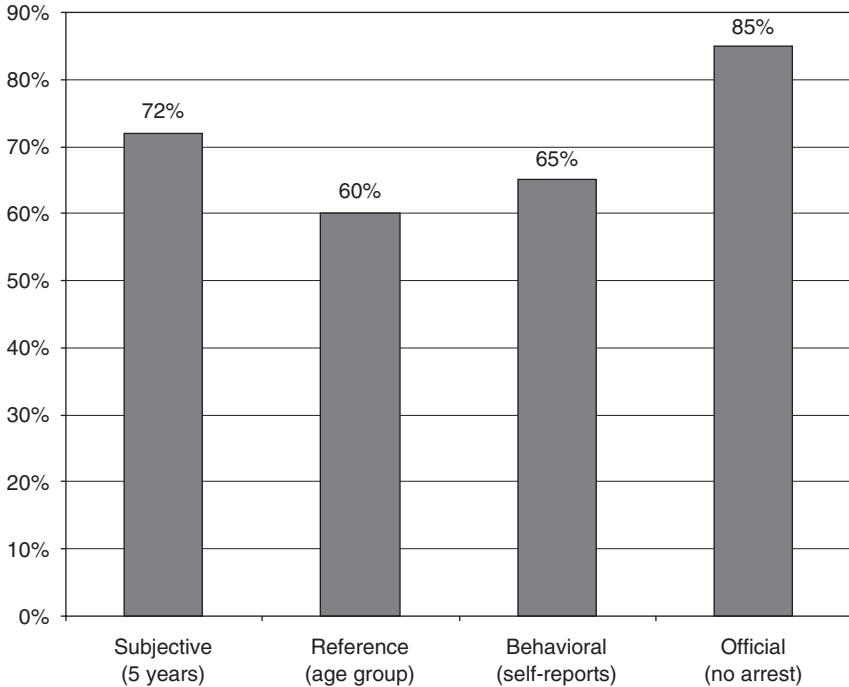
This study seeks to situate new conceptualizations and measures of desistance alongside more traditional indicators based on self-reported crime or arrests. This is accomplished in two ways. First, desistance prevalence rates across the different conceptualizations of desistance are examined. Second, we investigate the relationship between these new measures of desistance and a set of indicators previously established as predictors of existing conceptions of desistance. Given the primacy of adult social bonds in much work on desistance (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998), we emphasize these measures in our analysis rather than other factors emphasized in alternative theories of stability and change in criminal offending (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).<sup>2</sup> In so doing, we hope to situate our research within the broader landscape of the field and provide an empirical foundation for future development of subjective indicators of desistance.

## Results

Figure 1 presents the prevalence rates for all four conceptualizations of desistance, showing results that are generally consistent with prior work on behavioral and official desistance. By age 29 to 30, most individuals have moved away from crime, and this was true for all measures of desistance. When desistance is measured by arrest, the great majority (85%) of individuals have desisted. Among the four indicators, the conceptualization and measurement of desistance through official arrest yield the highest level of desistance. The self-reported behavioral outcome, in contrast, indicates significantly less desistance than the arrest-based measure. This difference between official desistance (85%) and behavioral desistance (65%) is likely to be a result of undetected crime, official biases, and low-level behavioral deviance that fails to attract the attention of law enforcement authorities.

The prevalence rates of subjective desistance (72%) and reference group desistance (60%) suggest that these conceptualizations capture movement away from crime at levels roughly similar to more traditional measures of desistance. Nevertheless, these indicators suggest a nontrivial difference in desistance rates. Individuals are much more likely to say that they have moderated their own behavior during the past 5 years than to say that they have desisted relative to their same-age peers. This would seem to indicate that peer or reference groups may be relatively stable with regard to deviant behavior. Given the strong relationship between individual behavior and peer behavior (Warr, 2002), it seems likely that

**Figure 1**  
**Desistance Rates by Four Measures**



some individuals move away from crime and therefore subjectively desist but do so at a rate consistent with their peers. In this regard, these individuals do not desist when measured against their reference group.

These results indicate the importance of considering different conceptualizations of desistance. The movement away from crime is dependent on the measurement of crime and the reference points used to assess desistance. For instance, some individuals would be labeled as desisters because they are no longer being arrested and have moderated their criminal behavior. Yet cross-tabulations of these desistance measures reveal that many of these same individuals have not moved away from crime as measured by self-reports or relative to their same-age peers. Having shown that prevalence rates vary across different conceptualizations of desistance, the next section investigates how the effects of some important predictors of desistance vary across these conceptualizations.



**Table 2**  
**Logistic Regression Estimates Predicting Desistance by Four Measures**

	Desistance Measure			
	Subjective (5 years)	Reference (Same Age)	Behavioral (Self-Report)	Official (No Arrest)
Intercept	0.972 (0.829)	-1.399* (0.744)	-1.513* (0.854)	2.348 (1.78)
Background				
Male	-0.436* (0.240)	0.401** (0.209)	-0.243 (0.239)	-1.859** (0.804)
White	-0.150 (0.292)	-0.420* (0.254)	0.637** (0.316)	0.531 (0.616)
Prior crime				
Youth crime	-0.023 (0.067)	0.172** (0.059)	0.068 (0.072)	0.271* (0.159)
Youth arrest	0.043 (0.297)	-0.133 (0.267)	-0.718** (0.290)	-0.563 (0.597)
Adult bonds				
Work quality	0.355 (0.257)	-0.363 (0.229)	0.067 (0.268)	-0.578 (0.646)
Relationship quality	0.543** (0.230)	0.638** (0.201)	0.704** (0.238)	1.313** (0.608)
Children	0.359 (0.234)	0.360* (0.202)	0.171 (0.240)	-1.179* (0.605)
Work friends	-0.558** (0.256)	-0.195 (0.241)	0.201 (0.536)	-0.316 (0.602)
-2 log likelihood	503.1	644.6	469.8	134.5
$\chi^2$ (df)	23.8** (8)	38.5** (8)	29.7** (8)	29.8** (8)
n	436	477	339	335

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ .

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

Table 2 presents logistic regression estimates predicting desistance across all four measures of desistance. Analysis is restricted to those who are "at risk" to desist. For subjective and reference group desistance, the analysis is restricted to those who report earlier involvement in the following acts: workplace deviance, substance use, and drunk driving. For behavioral desistance, the analysis is restricted to those who report earlier involvement in crime and deviance. Finally, for official desistance, the analysis is restricted to those with earlier arrests. Samples were defined in this fashion to ensure that those classified as desisters have actually moved away from these activities and that they are not abstainers who have never participated in crime or even minor deviance. We are always hesitant to impose restrictions that limit the sample. Given the newness of our measures, however, we took this step to ensure that the estimates and the inferences drawn from them speak to movement away from crime.

Table 2 indicates that relative to females, males are significantly less likely to desist from crime when measured by arrests (official desistance) or by behavior at earlier points in the life course (subjective desistance). In contrast, males report that they are more likely than females to desist relative to their same-age peers (reference group desistance) and not significantly different from females in the rate of self-reported (behavioral) desistance. Thus, males are not universally more likely than females to desist. Rather, the relationship between gender and desistance appears to

depend on definitions of desistance. Men are significantly less likely to desist than women when using official and subjective measures. In contrast, men are more likely than women to desist relative to their same-age reference group. Although we can only speculate as to the origins of such patterns, it may be the case that the reference group for more delinquent women includes more men than the reference group for the less delinquent women. Much of the work on desistance over the life course has emphasized males (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993), and our work adds to a small but growing body of research examining the gendered nature of desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998).

A similarly varied pattern is evident when considering race differences in desistance. Relative to non-Whites, Whites are more likely to move away from crime when desistance is measured through self-reported behavior. In contrast, Whites are significantly less likely to move away from crime relative to same-age peers. Net of the other covariates, no significant racial differences emerge when desistance is measured subjectively or when measured by official reports.

As with demographic indicators, the relationship between earlier criminality and desistance is largely dependent on how desistance is measured. Early crime significantly increases the likelihood that individuals will desist relative to their same-age peers. Similarly, earlier criminal behavior is associated with increased levels of official desistance. In contrast, prior arrest is associated with decreased behavioral desistance but unrelated to other indicators of desistance, net of the other variables in the model. It may be that youth with a history of arrest are the most embedded in crime and therefore the least likely to desist behaviorally. In our view, this pattern of results hints at the importance of alternative conceptualizations of desistance in disentangling the relationship between early delinquency and movement away from crime in adulthood.

Given the literature on the relationship between desistance and work and family bonds in adulthood (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993; Warr, 1998), it is somewhat surprising to observe an absence of significant relationships between work quality and movement away from crime in the YDS. In contrast to our measure of workplace quality, however, we find that relationship quality is a consistently strong predictor for all four desistance measures. More specifically, a quality relationship increases the odds of subjective desistance by 72% (logit = 0.543), reference group desistance by 89% (logit = 0.638), behavioral desistance by 102% (logit = 0.704), and official desistance by more than 250% (logit = 1.313).<sup>3</sup> The estimate for relationship quality is thus the strongest in magnitude and the most consistent predictor across the measures of desistance considered in our analysis.

In contrast to relationship quality, the effect of children on desistance again depends on how desistance is conceptualized. The odds of desistance relative to same-age peers are about 43% greater for those with children (logit = 0.360), but the odds of official desistance are about 70% lower for those with children (logit = -1.179). Having a child is unrelated to either subjective or behavioral desistance.

Finally, socializing with work friends significantly decreases the likelihood of subjective desistance (moving away from crime relative to 5 years earlier) but is unrelated to the three other conceptualizations of desistance.

## Discussion

Before discussing the results presented in Table 2, we wish to address the relevance of the new conceptualizations of desistance presented in this article. The defining characteristic of desistance measures is their ability to capture movement away from crime. The results presented in Figure 1 indicate that the new measures yield prevalence rates that are consistent with more traditional measures of desistance. Advances in the measurement and conceptualization of desistance (whether by arrest or self-reports or relative to peers or to oneself) are fundamental to advancing knowledge about changes in criminal offending, both within and across persons.

The contemporary predominance of official measures in desistance research can be problematic, primarily because these measures are potentially biased by law enforcement behavior (e.g., Dannefer & Schutt, 1982; Lundman & Kaufman, 2003). For this reason, we sought to expand the alternative indicators available to desistance researchers. Although some may argue that behavior that does not warrant an official justice response is less relevant for policy or research, we believe that such a focus restricts criminological inquiry. Despite the rapid expansion of the U.S. criminal justice system in recent decades, most Americans (some of whom self-report frequent or serious criminal offenses) have never had any formal contact with the system. Accordingly, inferences drawn from studies using only arrest measures are limited if we endeavor to use desistance as a general framework to understand cessation or moderation of delinquent behavior.

In our view, even more problematic is the potential bias introduced from variation in police behavior. A long line of research has examined variations in police patrol and enforcement with regard to appearance, gender, race, class, and geography (e.g., Lundman & Kaufman, 2003; Piliavin & Briar, 1964; Smith, Visher, & Davidson, 1984). Yet desistance studies based on arrest counts often turn a blind eye to these potential sources of bias. Although such considerations are clearly beyond the scope and reach of the current article, the subjective indicators introduced here provide viable alternatives to official measures that are consistent with foundational work in the sociology of crime and deviance.

Results presented in Table 2 demonstrate the relevance of developing alternative measures of desistance. Consider the relationship between gender and desistance. Males are more likely to be arrested and therefore may be less likely to desist by official measures, a finding evident in this study. Nevertheless, because males are likely to have more delinquent peers, they judge their behavior against a more delinquent reference group and thus report even greater reference group desistance than

females. Although sampling variation and the measurement of desistance clearly affect the findings and conclusions across studies, our gender findings are consistent with some other work in the area (Giordano et al., 2002; Graham & Bowling, 1996; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). The results thus fit with a larger literature suggesting there may be a gendered dynamic to desistance. Research has found, for instance, that the some factors important to movement away from crime for males, such as marriage, are unrelated or only conditionally related to female patterns of desistance (King, Massoglia, & MacMillan, in press). In our view, these gendered differences should be a focus of additional work on desistance.

The estimated effect of children similarly highlights intriguing variation in desistance processes. Conventional wisdom suggests that having a child engenders moderation in criminal behavior as individuals take up the role of parent. This hypothesis is supported in Table 2; when compared to those who do not have children, the odds of desistance relative to same-age peers are 43% greater among those with children. Among individuals with a history of arrest, however, childbearing decreases the likelihood of official desistance by more than 70%. It may be that among the most disadvantaged individuals (those likely to have repeated arrests), parenthood creates an earnings imperative that increases the motivation for economic crime (Uggen & Thompson, 2003). It is also likely that the relationship between parenthood and desistance is driven not only by the existence of the child but also by the quality of the relationship between parent and child, namely the degree of involvement and/or emotional commitment. Further specification along these lines may be particularly important in considering differences in the desistance patterns of mothers and fathers.

At first blush, the reference group findings may seem less relevant for policy purposes than the predictors of behavioral, official, and subjective conceptualizations of desistance. Nevertheless, these results offer an informative glimpse of the changing life circumstances associated with a sense of "settling down" relative to others one's age. For example, males and parents are more likely to believe they are desisting relative to their same-age peers, whereas males and parents are significantly less likely to desist by official measures. If men tend to exaggerate or hold mistaken impressions about the continued deviance of others their age, perhaps reentry and reintegration interventions could help to dispel such myths so that program participants can better contextualize their continuing delinquent behavior.

Our analysis also suggests other areas warranting additional research and policy development. For instance, no significant relationship was found between the measures of desistance and work quality, measured by holding a job related to long-term career goals. This finding stands in contrast to other research on desistance that emphasizes work quality as a significant predictor of movement away from crime (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Given our operationalization of work quality and the relatively simple models used in the present analysis, we are hesitant to make any strong claims about the relationship between work and desistance. Past studies having explored the link between work and desistance have found significant effects

only among older ex-offenders (Uggen, 2000) or among individuals with high work commitment (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Other research has found that the deterrent effect of work is a function of changing delinquent networks and exposure to prosocial coworkers that often accompany gainful employment (Wright & Cullen, 2004). Still other work finds no relationship between workplace stability and adult offending (Giordano et al., 2002). In light of the conditional or nonsignificant effects evident in other work, the nonsignificant findings presented in Table 2 illustrate the need to further examine the underlying processes explaining how and under what conditions the workplace facilitates movement away from crime.

Finally, the relationship between desistance and earlier crime and arrest warrants brief discussion. As expected, crime and deviance are significantly associated with patterns of official and behavioral desistance. Neither, however, is significantly associated with subjective desistance. Given the age of the sample (29 to 30 years old), it is possible that our reference point (5 years earlier) does not tap into a period in the life course when individuals were meaningfully involved in crime (see debates between Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983, and Shover & Thompson, 1992; Steffensmeier, Allan, Miles, Harer, & Streifel, 1989). Nevertheless, these nonsignificant findings also show how both “sinners” and “saints” moderate their earlier delinquency, albeit from different levels, during the transition to adulthood. These results also provide a first look at how these subjective assessments are related to problematic behavior at earlier points in the life course. Future studies may find it informative to consider how these alternative conceptualizations of desistance vary with other measures in adolescence (e.g., school achievement) and how subjective desistance is linked to other markers of adult status and attainment.

## Conclusions

Qualitative work shows the importance of the subjective dimensions of desistance, but these dimensions have rarely been addressed using survey methods. This article has offered a first attempt at a quantitative assessment of the subjective side of desistance. In so doing, the prevalence and predictors of official, behavioral, subjective, and reference group conceptualizations of desistance have been examined. Unsurprisingly, our research suggests that both the prevalence and the predictors of desistance vary considerably across these different conceptualizations.

In the end, we cannot recommend that empirical researchers adopt one measure of desistance over the others. Just as stratification researchers must consider a range of indicators of adult attainment (education, occupational prestige, social class, and socioeconomic status, to name a few), criminological study will perhaps best flourish when the specific operationalization of desistance is motivated by the theoretical question under consideration. A social-psychological study seeking to situate within-person changes in deviant behavior within the broader transition to adulthood, for

example, might benefit from a subjective measure of desistance. In contrast, studies concerned with peer relationships seem to call out for an indicator based on relative desistance and reference groups. Also, behavioral definitions are perhaps best applied where self-reports have proven useful in other criminological areas, such as surveys of the general population.

Although we have presented very simple models, we hope to motivate researchers to reconsider the role of demographic variables (e.g., gender and age) and life course markers (e.g., work quality and family formation) in predicting movement away from crime. More importantly, we hope that our alternative conceptualizations of desistance help to push desistance research beyond the relatively narrow focus on officially defined criminal populations. In our view, the recent emphasis on trajectory based models emphasizing police contacts has moved the field away from what we consider to be equally important debates about the conceptualization and measurement of desistance. In conclusion, we encourage a renewed focus on *what* desistance is from both sociological and criminological standpoints and on *who* should be included in the analysis of desistance from crime.

## Notes

1. The correlation between subjective desistance and reference group desistance is .348, suggesting that the two concentrations are indeed tapping distinctive domains.

2. Although researchers are increasingly integrating self-control and social control in the analysis of criminal behavior, we focus on the latter rather than the former. The Youth Development Study data contain only limited proxies for self-control, at least insofar as that concept has been operationalized in the criminological literature. Nevertheless, much of the between-person differences in impulsivity and low self-control will be captured by the youth crime and arrest indicators included in our multivariate models.

3. The transformation of a logistic regression estimate into a percentage change in odds involves exponentiating the parameter estimate.

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