Identifying Desistance Pathways in a Higher Education Program for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

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Abstract
The link between education and crime is a topic that requires special attention with respect to the converging influence of individual, social, and environmental factors. This article will investigate the educational pathways followed by students in a higher education program for formerly incarcerated individuals at a large state university in the northeastern United States. Specifically, it will explore the extent to which their postincarceration educational experiences served as a “hook for change” and also related impediments tied to street influences, financial constraints, stigma, academic and social development. Data were collected from a sample of 34 current and former students in the program, each of whom participated in a face-to-face interview. The higher education program played a key role in propelling the desistance process for research participants. This article will discuss how personal agency can be sustained through participation in higher education post release and the implications for future research on crime avoidance.

Keywords
postincarceration higher education, desistance, reintegration

Introduction
In recent years, the transformative power of postsecondary education has been in public favor as evidenced by the increased support for programs that fund the administration of college level instruction to individuals during and post incarceration.

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This development has helped to counteract prior federal grant restrictions severely limiting the availability of postsecondary correctional education (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). It is buttressed by contemporary studies that identify the completion of postsecondary carceral educational programming as a predictor of success for former offenders as measured by rates of employment and recidivism (Batiuk et al., 2005; Chappell, 2004). Recidivism rates among those who participated in but did not complete college level courses were not as high (Chappell, 2004). The prospects for success are even lower for those who make progress toward, but do not earn a general equivalency degree (GED) or comparable educational credential (Zgoba, Haugebrook, & Jenkins, 2008). Overall, individuals participating in prison-based educational programs do not reoffend as frequently as those enrolled in vocational training programs (Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000).

This article will address the role of postincarceration education received by former offenders in a university program, including how it might affect their potential to recidivate and sustain efforts to avoid crime. It is well established that ex-offenders who at the very least take carceral college courses enjoy increased self-confidence and tend to possess the skills needed to take advantage of new opportunities upon release from incarceration (Allred, Harrison, & O’Connell, 2013; Meyer & Randel, 2013). Yet, little is known about how participation in college classes post release can help members of that group avoid reoffending and progress toward desistance despite the burden of social stigma and other negative influences.

I inductively analyzed in-depth interviews with 34 former and current students in the program to assess preexisting and current levels of self-efficacy, with a specific focus on how such inclinations affected academic and social experiences during the postrelease period. Preexisting levels of self-efficacy were identified by individual commitments to school before and during incarceration as reported by research participants during the interviews. The purpose was to identify those educational and life experiences, other than involvement in the program that also contributed to current outlooks on crime. This inquiry was of particular import with respect to fully understanding the development of agency over time and the extent to which these elements might have shaped decisions to pursue or in most cases, continue college education after incarceration instead of resorting back to crime. I also considered the relationships between support networks shared by program members, engagement in higher education post release and self-described potential for reoffending and crime abandonment.

**Literature Review**

The successful reentry of former inmates into mainstream society is an issue that has been widely investigated mainly due to the current mass incarceration epidemic in the United States (Hagan & Foster, 2012; Lynch & Sabol, 2004; Sampson & Loeffler, 2010). Research has shown that postsecondary education is tied to increased employability, which in turn diminishes the economic appeal of crime (see Blomberg Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011; Lockwood, Nally, Ho, & Knutson, 2012). This is especially true...
for individuals who have completed some or all credits toward a college degree, as GED or high school diploma holders typically find it more difficult to obtain a viable job post release (Meyer & Randel, 2013; Zgoba et al., 2008). This can lead to status frustration for individuals with low educational achievement and thus no legitimate prospects for economic success, ultimately increasing their likelihood of reoffending (Reiss & Rhodes, 1963; Vacca, 2004). To that end, postsecondary education has been identified as a mechanism for increasing job opportunities post incarceration and in turn facilitating transitions away from crime (Kerkchoff, 1976; Meyer, 1977; Pallas, 2003).

The perceived or actual acquisition of social capital through educational attainment (re)attaches individuals to conventional values and aspirations (Ford & Schroeder, 2010). Perhaps that rationale could be extended to explain how engagement in higher education propels the desistance efforts of individuals who remain in the process of completing their collegiate studies over the course of the postincarceration period. Engagement in higher education during this time might help to lessen the social burdens and stigma typically encountered by ex-felons in the pursuit of traditional goals and aspirations.

Theoretical Explanations of Desistance From Crime

Desistance, or the cessation of criminal activity, is a concept that can be explained using more than one theoretical framework (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001; Kazemian, 2007; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). A discussion of relevant theories is provided below to help illustrate ways in which non-criminal trajectories can emanate from multiple and often times, overlapping facets. Indeed, scholars agree that desistance from crime is a dynamic process, the essence of which cannot be fully comprehended through an age graded analysis of single life events such as marriage or employment (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Holland, 2003; Maruna, Immárigeon, & LeBel, 2004; McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, & Maruna, 2012). Accordingly, life-course perspectives on crime explain the onset and relinquishment of deviant behaviors within the context of chronological and developmental events (Farrington, 2011; Sampson & Laub, 2005). Aside from employment and marital relationships, participation in postsecondary carceral education has been identified as a turning point, an experience characterized by the adoption of new attitudes and routine activities that are incompatible with reoffending (Allred et al., 2013).

This article will address the extent to which participants in higher education received post release describe a similar impact on criminal involvement, onset, and continuation of desistance processes. A central part of this discussion involves the influence of higher education on personal agency and the extent to which that relationship shapes efforts to abandon crime throughout the postincarceration period. Such developments in personal agency can be attributed to variations in social control, mental awareness, and opportunities for social learning (Akers, 2009; Hirschi, 1969; Maruna, 2011) and thus warrant consideration from a life-course perspective.
Agency is a concept that has been used in the desistance literature to describe individuals’ responses to internal and external forces in ways that motivate them to replace deviant behaviors with normative ones. It can be viewed simply as an internal source of control over future actions (Matza, 1964) or with a broader lens where those intentions are perceived to arise and vary depending on contextual factors (Farrall & Bowling, 1999). While the ability to effectively choose between right and wrong is a necessary element of sustained crime avoidance, recent research suggests a need to look beyond such cognition (Healy, 2013). To that end, ex-offenders can be presented with a structural opportunity that promotes rational thinking and productive actions (Barry, 2007). Yet, such an option does not automatically transcend into reality, as individuals must first contemplate a non-criminal life and also commit to taking steps in furtherance of it (Maruna, 2001).

Accordingly, Giordano et al. (2003) acknowledged that desistance involves a complex process where an individual must be mentally and emotionally prepared to embrace these “hooks for change” or opportunities for personal growth. In doing so, desisters take accountability for their actions and are less motivated to commit crime as a coping mechanism for dealing with negative emotions. The ability to do so is a sign of emotional maturity that generally develops with age and/or in tandem with a key life event such as marriage or employment (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Laub & Sampson, 1993). Despite such contributions, current literature lacks significant explanations about “how offenders utilize their agentic resources to achieve a meaningful and crime-free life” (Healy, 2013, p.11).

Yet, postincarceration involvement in higher education might facilitate cognitive transformation in ways that are of particular import for desistance processes as this experience unfolds within the context of a university setting, an environment where it is dually reinforced through social and academic support systems. Furthermore, getting accepted into an institution of higher learning can reduce the burden of incarceration as college students with felony records benefit from increased opportunities to develop relationships with prosocial peers and enter primary labor markets. Indeed, recent evidence shows that formerly incarcerated individuals who complete a higher education program during or after incarceration have greater potential for postrelease employment and crime avoidance compared with noncompleters (Ford & Schroeder, 2010; Lockwood et al., 2012; Zgoba et al., 2008). This study seeks to investigate specific ways in which participation in a postsecondary educational program for ex-offenders might contribute to desistance pathways. A crucial part of this inquiry focuses on the development of inner will to change, how it relates to structural inequalities and any influence on experiences in higher education, and in turn efforts to reenter society, begin and maintain a crime-free life.

Method

Data

The data for this study were derived from 34 qualitative in-depth interviews with current and former college students in a higher education program for formerly
incarcerated students at a university I refer to here as State University. Among the research participants, there were two alumni, 23 students who had been taking classes at the university for at least one year, and eight incoming students; two of whom planned to postpone their enrollment for one year. This sample included 29 men, three women and one transgender person with ages ranging from 24 to 57. The mean age was 28. The interviewees were ethnically diverse as they self-identified as follows: Black (12), Biracial (7), Latino (5), White (5), Asian (3), and Middle Eastern (1).

The program affords formerly incarcerated individuals who have demonstrated a keen interest in higher education the opportunity to pursue it at the university level upon release. Individuals were made aware of the program by the director who regularly visited correctional facilities, or assessment center counselors during interviews held prior to release. Program membership was voluntary and not a condition of parole or probation, yet it reportedly helped some participants build rapport and trust with parole officers. Eligibility was based on the completion of community college level courses taken during incarceration. All research participants met these requirements, with the exception of three who were required to complete credits from a local community college upon release and prior to enrolling in the university. Inability to show proof of a high school diploma, ineligibility due to a short sentence, and lack of awareness about college classes within the correctional facility were the reasons given by the three individuals who did not take postsecondary carceral courses. Nonetheless, those three persons, along with seven other interviewees, took college classes prior to their incarceration; however, none had earned a degree at the time of sentencing.

Most of the research participants were sentenced under state law and served prison time at a youth correctional facility prior to attending the university. One interviewee who was considered a repeat offender spent his most recent incarceration in federal prison. All of the research participants were sentenced to three to ten years for violent or nonviolent crimes ranging from the commission of robberies, assaults, or tangential involvement in homicides to drug possession and credit card fraud. The majority had been released between one month and five years prior to our interview. At that time, 9% of research participants remained under probation, 61% were serving a parole term, 18% had already completed a parole term and 12% served all time while incarcerated. The probationers were assigned a parole officer yet they distinguished it from parole because they were subject to “intense supervision.”

Research participants were drawn from individual names and contact information obtained from a list of 50 eligible program participants provided by the director. I first attempted phone and email communications with every named person, with the exception of five who remained in either state or federal custody.

Eight individuals never acknowledged my efforts to make contact, three did not show up at the scheduled interviews, and one canceled but was not receptive to my attempts to reschedule. The remaining 34 persons responded and completed a preliminary phone screening during which they answered general questions about their involvement in the program and willingness to participate in the study. I outlined the research objectives and guaranteed confidentiality at the start of each interview.
All research questions were open-ended in nature as the primary goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of the social processes contributing to changes in criminal behaviors over time, and the role attachment and detachment to education played in these processes. Research participants were asked to describe varying levels of engagement in education throughout their life course and any ways in which these experiences might have influenced their involvement in crime. I asked about the extent, if any, to which their preincarceration educational experiences were affected by familial ties, peer influences, and neighborhood factors and ultimately whether these interrelationships affected involvement in crime during that period. I also sought information about how engagement in postsecondary education during incarceration and postincarceration might have shaped current outlooks on crime. Interviewees were asked about personal motivations for enrolling in college courses during those periods, the quality of instruction received, and the influence of peer networks in both supporting and hindering attachment to education. Finally, I asked research participants to specifically explain whether and to what extent their college experiences vis-à-vis membership in the program affected their efforts to desist from crime. They were also encouraged to describe general challenges to reentry, those specific to students in the program, as well as coping mechanisms used to overcome such burdens.

All of the interviews were voluntary, confidential, and compensated with the receipt of US$25 made available through a research grant. They were face-to-face and approximately one hour in duration. I audio-recorded the interviews to preserve the content of each conversation for later transcription. Data were transcribed and preliminarily sorted into three main categories for analysis, including preincarceration, incarceration, and postincarceration experiences. Finally, I coded the responses into subgroups based upon thematic patterns recurring throughout the data. The current article focuses specifically on research participants’ postincarceration motivations and educational experiences, and their impact on desistance processes.

**Analysis Strategy**

I used an inductive analysis technique to identify responses related to preincarceration, incarceration, and postincarceration experiences reported by research participants as pertinent to their involvement in crime over the life course. This required extensive reviews of the data for relevant words, phrases, and passages followed by a preliminary sorting process through which the data were categorically organized in these three groups. I closely scrutinized data from each group to make thematic observations concerning the onset, persistence, and desistance of criminal behaviors, all of which were closely tied to varying levels of engagement in education throughout the life course. This type of analysis contributed to the emergence of hypotheses suggesting a time order sequence of multiple events affecting involvement in crime.

I refined emergent hypotheses according to patterns and inconsistencies within and among interview responses, a technique used to increase the internal validity of qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006; Miller, 2011; Silverman, 2006). I began by comparing and synthesizing similar statements included in each of the three main groups related to preincarceration, incarceration, and postincarceration to draw related conclusions.
This analysis was repeated for each subcategory to establish cohesive “storylines” (Agnew, 2006) that accurately reflected patterned responses about motivations for crime and desistance. I separately addressed conflicting data and offered explanations for how and the extent to which such information might be reconciled with hypotheses. This inductive process was thorough, with the data presentation below providing readers with a detailed context to evaluate the conclusions drawn.

The life-course perspective applied to this qualitative research comes with both benefits and drawbacks. The investigation of events across a lifetime is particularly relevant with respect to issues best explained in stages that naturally occur and unfold over time. This methodological approach offers detailed insight into developmental changes and thus provides the context for rational inferences to be made (Mears, Cochran, & Siennick, 2013; Veysey, Martinez, & Christian, 2013). Nonetheless, there are some internal validity concerns related to life-course perspectives and selection bias. With life-course research comes the risk of misinformation often attributed to faulty memories, deceit, and telescoping (Carbone-Lopez & Miller, 2012). In addition, there is a tendency for the positive relationship between the completion of a college degree and crime to be overstated when rigorous research methods for addressing self-selection bias are not used (Kim & Clark, 2013; Morgan & Winship, 2007).

Qualitative research can lessen the relevance of selection bias by offering descriptive accounts about current engagement in higher education and how it affects efforts to desist from crime. This is especially relevant to my research sample which consisted of former offenders who earned a bachelor’s degree and were taking or planned to take college courses in the near future. Interviews about life-course events provide a comprehensive overview of changes in interactions between people and their surroundings over time (Young & Rees, 2013). This type of approach is highly valued as situational and background factors affecting crime and desistance are dynamic and warrant analyses from a life-course perspective (Agnew, 2006; Giordano et al., 2003; Maruna, 2011). Considering these elements in isolation would diminish the identification of the influence of life events, which can appear to be subjective and discontinuous in the abstract (Cid & Martí, 2012; Lyngstad & Skardhamar, 2013; Sampson & Laub, 2003).

This qualitative study adds richness and detail to theoretical frameworks often used to explain involvement in and desistance from crime; however, the results are not generalizable. The purposive sample is not representative as it only includes individuals who served time at correctional facilities in the state of New Jersey, and all of the research participations are men with the exception of three individuals. Nonetheless, the results will provide insight into the patterned interactions that influence varying levels of attachment to higher education during the postrelease period and how these changes affect participation in crime. These mechanisms do not suggest causality but rather an enhanced perspective on the connection between higher education, crime and desistance.

**Findings**

The receipt of higher education is commonly linked to a decreased likelihood for reoffending (Lockwood et al., 2012). Interestingly, all research participants acknowledged the positive influence of higher education on their life trajectories yet most of them did
not make a direct connection between that educational experience and decisions to relinquish involvement in crime. Instead, interviewees mainly reflected on how the opportunity to pursue a postsecondary carceral education motivated them to execute an already existing (but dormant) inner will to desist from crime which was facilitated by the experience of getting incarcerated. This development coincided with transitions into adulthood, as all but one of the participants were in their early-to-mid 20s upon release. Moreover, alternative pathways to crime were furthered through participation in post-secondary education vis-à-vis membership in a higher education program for formerly incarcerated individuals at State University. In addition, this educational opportunity helped forge social bonds between participant ex-offenders/college students along with engagement in higher education and other noncriminal routine activities.

Against this backdrop, research participants were seemingly better positioned for employment success in primary labor markets compared with former prisoners who do not pursue a postsecondary degree (see Zgoba et al., 2008). Deb expressed this very sentiment in the following statement:

I think it might be more difficult for [formerly incarcerated] people who don’t pursue higher education 'cause it’s like . . . already having the felony, being incarcerated you already have things that put Xs behind your name or on your resume or whatever. So it’s like why wouldn’t you want to do everything you can to make up for it you know?

Similarly, Isaiah believed that he would have broader access to employment options after completing the higher education program. As he put it,

I believe that I have a better opportunity than anyone else out here . . . who is sitting in this room [other college students including those who were not previously incarcerated]. When I finish school do you know how many people I’m gonna know through the [college program]? That’s how I look at it . . . At the end of the day, I will forever be haunted by that checkbox. Have you ever been convicted of a crime? Check, I have to check it.

Indeed, these rich accounts illustrated some potential ways in which postcarceral college completion or at the very least participation might offset employment barriers stemming from the stigma of incarceration. However, as this study was nonlongitudinal in nature, conclusions were not drawn about the actual impact of having a college experience and/or credential(s) on postincarceration job prospects. Nonetheless, the extent and nature in which these ex-offenders were involved in higher education was portrayed as both an ingredient and reflection of commitments to change and desistance from crime.

Desisting From Crime: Hooks for Change and the Challenges of Sustaining Them

Desistance from crime has often been described as a process (Maruna, 2011), the continuation of which largely depends on the development of transitional life events that
serve to help individuals remain focused on goals and aspirations (Sampson & Laub, 2003). Relationships centered on marriage and employment are typically considered “hooks for change,” providing individuals with a chance to engage in alternative interests and activities to crime (Giordano et al., 2003). Similarly, research participants considered their postrelease enrollment in higher education as a “hook for change” given that they reportedly felt more confident and purposeful in their decisions to abandon crime after being accepted into the program. For example, Tarik commented about how participation in the college program shaped his life trajectory postincarceration:

Coming home is a crazy experience after you’ve been in a place you know you’ve been in the same place over the years . . . [So] it was something for me to go and do everyday like “oh I’ve got to go to school.” You know it’s just so much, there’s so much pulling you in the wrong direction. You know [State University] is kinda like something that’s pulling you in the right direction.

In addition, subsequent engagement in academic and related program activities catalyzed the adoption of college student master statuses to replace former criminal identities and thus helped forge noncriminal pathways. Randy elaborated more on this point:

I see light in this program. The other night I was at the meeting they said it was 39 [program member] students there . . . you could see the joy and appreciation in their faces and their whole aura you could see everything. So it definitely make[s] a change. I guess it all depends on the person too whether they want to stay home or they don’t . . . because that lifestyle is like a magnet if you’ve been a part of it . . . It’s easy to sell drugs, it’s easy to get a gun, rob. It’s easy to do all that you know what I’m sayin? So if that person feels discouraged and they want to go back to that lifestyle then they’re gonna do it regardless of whether they enjoy being here or not. But this program could help you not want to do that you know what I’m saying? ’Cause it’s an alternative.

These findings suggest that desistance from crime is not necessarily one-dimensional, based solely on individual desire to cease and/or actual cessation of criminal conduct. Accordingly, research participants spoke about relinquishing criminal identities and behaviors as a multifaceted development, also framed by engagement in higher education, program membership, neighborhood factors, and emergent perspectives on the benefits and risks of crime.

Indeed, all research participants were ex-offender/college students whose commitment to conventional life pathways was emboldened through their postrelease participation in higher education. Yet, as mentioned earlier, crime avoidance is often conceptualized as a series of transitional events and therefore progress toward that goal can be time-consuming and encumbered by structural conditions. As a result, for purposes of this study, desistance was measured by words, expressed desires, and/or stated actions that demonstrated or reinforced a commitment to noncriminal trajectories. This operationalization is supported by other research, also indicating that these features might be shaped by pre- and postincarceration influences (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna & Roy, 2007; Veysey et al., 2013).
Although the research participants perceived their postrelease engagement and success in higher education as a vehicle for change, they came from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds that contributed in part to varied postincarceration experiences and potential for reoffending. Specifically, this study included interviews with White, Asian, Latino, Black, Biracial, and Middle Eastern individuals who described communities of origin and postincarceration places of residence that were categorized as suburban, urban disadvantaged, or near disadvantaged. Notably, the Black, Latino, and Biracial participants who came from and returned to poor inner cities were the least educationally advantaged when they first entered the higher education program. This was largely due to deeply rooted inequalities of race, class, and place which shaped both crime entrée and opportunities to avoid crime.

As a result of the accrual of multiple disadvantages associated with urban racial isolation and poverty, [disadvantaged racial minority students] not only had fewer family resources to draw from for full engagement at State University, but often had to balance school with providing such resources, themselves, to kith and kin. (Livingston & Miller, 2014, p. 238)

In addition, those who maintained residential or social ties to these precarcal communities faced serious risks for the retaliatory violence that is part and parcel of the “code of the streets” (see Anderson, 1999). Despite having the inner will or desire to change, actions in furtherance of conventional goals such as employment or college success were at risk of being thwarted by such external constraints on upward mobility. Nonetheless, four out of the six research participants who violated parole came from urban disadvantaged neighborhoods, but none of them attributed their illicit behaviors solely to structural circumstances.

Of particular interest was the fact that the six individuals who persisted in crime after release from prison were either incoming or first-year students at the time of the interviews. More importantly, these individuals had, for the most part, only been released from prison for one year or less and were just beginning their postsecondary education, outside of a carceral setting. They and other research participants portrayed the transition from prison to society as a vulnerable time in regard to managing criminal temptations presented by peers and neighborhood influences with conflicting desires to engage in noncriminal pursuits such as higher education. For instance, the six parole violators committed related offenses after gaining acceptance into the program but prior to completing their freshman year at State University. Specifically, five of them failed mandatory drug tests after returning to marijuana smoking. The other person was rearrested for a violent crime committed in response to an act he perceived as a threat to his masculinity. Even though the exact events leading up to these technical and substantive infractions varied, they were all driven by impulsive decisions. Furthermore, while only one was arrested as a consequence, they were all reprimanded and placed at risk of losing program eligibility and in turn admission to State University which ironically strengthened their commitment to change.
Gus who was an incoming student when he violated parole mentioned, “I tested positive for marijuana and [it] was just a freak accident . . . not a freak accident . . . I would like to say it was an aberration just a total mistake.” With regret he revealed, “I was put in a position to start my life over,” and thus implied the potential benefits of having the opportunity to pursue a higher education post release. Quincy was also just beginning his first college semester when he violated parole for smoking marijuana and was required to attend drug counseling as a result. He further explained how this punishment, although lenient, motivated him to reevaluate some life priorities:

I mean it’s crazy that they give you a chance all these people that helped me get in [to State University]. That makes me want to do good in school and that makes me not want to be get re-incarcerated too. But that’s a gimme as soon as I got out I said I was never going to go back but education wise . . . [attending State University] makes me want to stay out. I like being in this environment it’s great.

Although Quincy failed a drug test after getting released from prison, he still wanted to change his life. Becoming involved in higher education post release helped strengthen this commitment and encouraged his engagement in noncriminal activities.

*Higher Education, Identity Transformation, and Emergent Hooks for Change*

Research participants characterized the program as a medium for inspiration and change. However, the eight incoming students had not begun taking classes at the time of our interview and thus could not speak to the transformative power of postincarceration involvement in higher education based on any actual experience, yet they all saw the potential in it. In contrast, Geoff was among the majority of research participants who shared personal knowledge about postcarceral college participation as a “hook for change.” As he explained, “You need the opportunity to be able to progress. You need at least a glimmer of opportunity. A glimmer of hope. A lot of people are stagnant because they don’t see that glimmer of hope.” Other interviewees emphasized that the program offers a viable alternative to crime only for those students who already possessed an inner will to change. This, along with the fact that the program was voluntary, suggests that these ex-offenders could have a natural tendency to move away from crime and thus might have done so even if they had not been presented with this educational opportunity.

In addition, the research participants were all formerly incarcerated, an experience that is often cited as a turning point in life trajectories (Ashkar & Kenny, 2008; Maruna, 2001; Soyer, 2014). To that point, Mike explained, “I got sentenced to ten years, I would’ve learned my lesson after a year or two or three,” which suggests that beginning a postsecondary education was not a necessary element of change for him. However, he did admit that continuing his college studies outside of prison motivated him to strive for educational success and other conventional goals such as employment. Ivan shared a similar revelation:
As I got into this program and began to learn more and just the opportunities that education affords and just being in the intellectual environment helps me understand a little bit more of why I would do things . . . why it’s important to take a step back and evaluate a situation.

Notably, he did not consider himself a “criminal” but rather “someone who had messed up.” For these reasons, Ivan conceptualized his postrelease college experience as a “hook for change” and not a pivotal life occurrence.

Accordingly, participation in the college program enabled participants to change given that it served as a pathway to, rather than an impetus for, crime avoidance. Cameron had been previously arrested several times for his involvement in armed robberies. It was not until three years into his most recent incarceration that he felt ready to consider alternative pathways to crime. Cameron believed this cognitive development needed to happen before he was able to fully reap the benefits of higher education. As he suggested, “You can’t change that person who wants to be ignorant. You can only advise him, tell him if he don’t want to change its over. Only you can change. That’s my opinion and I think that’s valid.” To illustrate this point, Cameron explained that during incarceration, he began to view higher education as viable means to financial stability and in essence avoid crime. Influenced by this enlightened perspective, he became engaged in college classes both during and after incarceration.

Zach also recalled experiencing a breakthrough in his outlook on crime and post-secondary education that took place during incarceration. He came to a similar realization about the value of attending college after interacting with his older cellmate, a repeat offender at the county jail where he stayed before being assigned to a correctional facility. As a result, he wanted a different future and enrolled at a community college upon release from incarceration. Through that experience, Zach became even more determined to abandon his former drug dealer mentality. He started to believe that “there’s only a small percentage of people who sell drugs and then turn their money clean and then become perfect.” As an alternative, Zach “really chose to see that education is the key [to financial success].” At the time of our interview, he was in his last year at State University and had future plans to pursue a graduate degree.

It is evident that research participants needed to be emotionally and mentally ready to accept the program and in turn higher education as a “hook for change.” They also spoke about how access to the academic and cultural aspects of a university education vis-à-vis the program encouraged continued commitment to actions reflecting those changes. Yet, attempts to avoid crime did not automatically translate into action as some interviewees were distracted by social and economic challenges typically encountered upon release from incarceration, as I discuss in the next section.

The Challenges of Pursuing Higher Education as Hook for Change

Influences of postcarceral places. A significant number of individuals released from incarceration return to neighborhoods characterized by structural disadvantage, the elements of which are commonly linked to crime and reoffending (Anderson, 1999;
Clear, 2007; Wilson, 1996). In all, 12 research participants described growing up in inner cities where drugs, gang activity, and violence were common among residents, who were characterized as having low educational and economic attainment. Eight of these interviewees maintained social ties in such areas and spoke in detail about the impact of street culture on their new identities and how exposure to the university environment mediated this influence.

All residents living in socially disorganized neighborhoods are expected to abide by informal rules of behavior commonly known as the “code of the street.” This subculture fosters a mentality where aggression and violence are expected reactions to real or perceived threats (Anderson, 1999). Ulysses described these outcomes as fatalistic and thus emanating from embedded environmental features which were reinforced through normative social behaviors: “I just do what I have to do. So . . . if it’s time for me to die or end up doing something again that forces me to go back . . . you know I guess that’s just my story. I do try to avoid it to a certain extent but I just can’t let nobody disrespect me or nothing like that.” Ulysses was seemingly committed to a crime-free future, yet he also felt vulnerable to the possibility of reoffending given certain social and economic characteristics of his postcarceral places of residence. Given such circumstances, he believed it might become necessary to use violence to (re)establish street credibility and in turn for self-preservation purposes.

Like other research participants, Ulysses identified family ties and monetary constraints as the primary reasons behind his inability to move away from that environment. He lived in an urban community with an elderly relative who greatly depended on him for financial support. Most of his expendable income went toward maintaining the home, a staple in the family for past generations. Ulysses, an upperclassman at the university, commuted on a daily basis back and forth to the same neighborhood where he lived prior to his incarceration. He explained that the prevalence of crime in that area made it hard for him to totally abandon his former “street mentality”:

So you know it’s hard to try to be you know submissive and not be aggressive ‘cause . . . I don’t want to get in trouble but at the same time I have to protect myself and I have to make sure I’m good so that’s like the only thing. It’s like a switch ‘cause when I’m in [the city where State University is located] you know I’m social, my guard is down and stuff like that but as soon as I get back home you know my guard is back up. ’Cause like I said I’ve been out there for years you know. I have a name, I did a lot of things and people don’t care. You know so there’s always somebody out there that want to make a name off of you.

Kerri was also raised in an urban disadvantaged community but described the challenge of avoiding financially rooted criminal temptations in that type of environment. She lived off campus in a neighborhood outside of where she grew up but regularly visited a close family member who still resided there. Kerri spent her childhood years living in a public housing development with her single mother. It was an everyday occurrence for residents to get arrested and incarcerated, mainly for drug and gang related activities. By the age of 16, Kerri became enamored with the lure of making
fast money. This fascination precipitated her involvement in crime and subsequent incarceration. Years later, Kerri described the criminogenic neighborhood influences she still encountered when visiting her childhood home:

That’s where I go back all the time and it’s like people always you know they know about the stuff that I used to be involved in and what I do and it’s kind of like people, places and things for an addict. You know what I mean? It’s always that temptation. You need quick money, you need a guy who could get you that money. You know what I mean? Like that kind of thing so.

Ethan too identified certain characteristics of a postcarceral environment which left him feeling susceptible to the possibility of getting money through illicit means. Unlike Kerri, he lived in the same neighborhood that he did prior to getting incarcerated. Upon returning to that area, Ethan was immediately approached by former peers whom he used to sell drugs with. He recalled how they attempted to “welcome” him back into their circle:

I did have people too once I was released came to me, they knew my reputation so they was like handouts was basically awarded to me and I had to turn it down ’cause I’m like I know if I take this and I start school four months from now, I’m not gonna be able to stop.

Ethan clarified that these handouts consisted of money and drugs to sell for a profit. He turned these offers down but still puts himself “through the struggle by denying that option.” It remained a challenge for Ethan because “with bills, rent and two kids,” he knew that “money would be more accessible” if he succumbed to criminal pressures. However, as he lived near the university, these issues were not compounded by the burden of traveling back and forth. Other participants were not as fortunate and I turn to their experiences next.

Financial and housing-related obstacles. Lacking the opportunity to live close to campus was a common concern among other research participants as commuting added to the strain of learning how to simultaneously balance academic, social, and familial responsibilities. At the time of our interview, Nate was an accomplished student and father of two. He became thoroughly engaged in higher education during his first semester at the university, while serving the remainder of his time at a halfway house. That semester, he earned a 4.0 grade point average (GPA) and also made the Dean’s List. He largely attributed that success to the fact that he “had nothing to do but go to school, come back, study and do work.” After leaving the halfway house, Nate became overwhelmed by bills, child care, evictions and driving infractions, all of which adversely affected his academic performance. His GPA had since improved, yet it was still difficult for him to effectively manage the demands of commuting.

Isaiah expanded on this point and spoke about how the strain of traveling a substantial distance to and from school might shape his chances of reoffending. He was an incoming
commuter student and he grew anxious about finding a job near the university campus along with affordable housing all before classes started. As Isaiah reflected,

I’m terrified I’m gonna have to commute for the first couple of weeks . . . I don’t know if I had everything now I’d be good. If I was working and going to school I wouldn’t worry. But I’m worried right now like damn what am I gonna do? I gotta get a job quick. If I don’t get a job that’s the difference between what I’m gonna do to stay afloat.

Xander shed light on the policy implications of these concomitant residential and monetary burdens often faced by research participants. Speaking from personal experience, he suggested, “some sort of housing facility for guys that just get out” would be ideal as “they are not from this area.” Xander emphasized that “an affordable place where guys could live, in the area would help the program. It’s always been big challenge with guys who have to commute a lot. They could fall off you know.”

To this point, Peter mentioned some potential benefits of living on or near the college and specific ways in which these features might better facilitate efforts to desist from crime. He believed the university campus provided students, particularly those who commute from disadvantaged neighborhoods, an opportunity to be “in a positive environment instead of a negative one.” For instance, Peter noticed that program members established legitimate routines centered on the campus environment. He explained, “this is their job and so even if they don’t have class, they’re here studying or they’re helping other people or they’re just hanging out on campus instead of going back to their old crowd or old places.” Peter was suggesting that perhaps the university campus setting could have even a broader, positive impact on desistance processes if program members were afforded the opportunity to also live in or around that atmosphere.

Challenges associated with stigma. College education provides an alternative focus to crime, yet college students with felony records can easily become distracted and/or unmotivated by external influences (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Chappell, 2004). Criminal background checks conducted as a prerequisite for college admissions, housing, and employment are some examples, as they serve to reinforce criminal labels, making it hard for ex-felons to access such opportunities (Jacobs, 2005; Pinard, 2010). As a result, formerly incarcerated individuals who perceive or experience social stigma post release are at risk of resorting back to familiar modes of criminality as a quick way to cope with the resulting frustrations (Travis, 2006). Luckily, research participants explained that they were able to access program resources that helped them to overcome such hardships in conventional ways.

To illustrate this point, Wayne shared a story about his initial misfortune in pursuing certain job and housing options after his criminal record was uncovered as part of requisite background verification. As he explained, “I did have an opportunity to get an internship locally and they were doing the hiring through a separate agency than the one I would work for and that other agency wouldn’t hire me because of my criminal record.” Around the same time, Wayne was also turned down for an apartment based
on the results from a criminal felony check. Despite such struggles, he persevered and eventually obtained a coveted internship and suitable housing. Wayne credited the program for giving him and others the confidence needed to accomplish goals in spite of past criminal histories.

In Deb’s case, she established contacts through the program at State University, connections that directly helped her obtain employment through a department at the university. At the age of 28, she had never been turned down for employment until after her release from a youth correctional facility. Deb recalled how she felt after being rejected from the first job she applied for post release “I feel like as soon as I told her my situation, which I tried to downplay as much as possible . . . I didn’t get the job. I felt like it had to do with that. I felt like she [the employer] was judging me so.” These thoughts were primarily driven by her own fears about how her felony record might have affected the employer’s decision as the true source of it was never revealed. Other students in the program expressed similar insecurities about being accepted back into general society.

Overall, the fear of social stigmatization led research participants to question their ability to assimilate into the university community, a group predominately comprised of students with no criminal record who started college immediately after graduating from high school. In contrast, Oliver for instance dropped out of high school at the age of 16 and earned his GED shortly after. In addition, he took approximately four college classes while incarcerated, an experience that afforded him the opportunity to hone his reading and writing skills to some extent. However, Oliver believed that his lack of engagement in school preincarceration negatively affected his postcarceral college experience. As he reflected, “I didn’t have any experience writing essays, papers, no math, history like it’s hard for me and like other than that academically it’s a challenge.”

Betty was also a current student in the program who earned a GED after dropping out of high school in the 10th grade. At the time of our interview, she was entering her fifth year at the university. Yet, Betty recalled how “underprepared” she felt for the first three years there. She further explained, “I didn’t really feel prepared to actually be a college student until last year and this year and I could study right and I could read the way you’re supposed to read and not take hours to read one page.” She explained that the quality of her secondary education was good but her disengagement from school in the middle of the 10th grade set her back academically. As a result, Betty felt that her academic skills had not progressed beyond what they were at the time of incarceration even though she did complete one college course during her sentence. Other interviewees also noted that diminished opportunities for carceral educational advancement might be due to budgetary and administrative constraints limiting the number of available courses.

In addition to thwarting educational growth, the experience of incarceration might stunt, and in some cases reverse, social development, causing college students with felony records to feel unsure about their academic and social capabilities. Kerri was a 23-year-old student who explained why some individuals in the program were reluctant to interact with nonmembers due to reservations about their significant age differences.
She recalled that “a lot of them are like 30 you know so their challenge is trying to sit in a class with people that are 18 and they’re 30. You know that alone is a challenge, like plus people that spent six, seven, eight, ten years in prison.” Kerri felt that her own social skills were underdeveloped because “once you get to prison you stop aging.” She was incarcerated at the age of 18 and felt insecure about her social competencies as an adult.

Interviewees also expressed distress over how and the extent to which exposure to carceral environments shaped social relationships post release. Dexter described the correctional facility environment as a “spectrum of rude aggression . . . just disregard of consideration, of manners.” He was released a few years prior to our interview, yet still felt some discontent over the fact that he was unable to completely separate himself from that mind-set. Randy shared similar accounts of the atmosphere in the correctional facility where he served time. He was hesitant to socialize with students who did not come from that environment and were likely unaware that “the slightest thing could make you angry ’cause you already angry you know what I’m sayin? And you trying to actually suppress it. So the slightest thing could open it up.”

Indeed, it was a struggle for many research participants to persevere beyond social and economic hurdles and wholeheartedly embark upon higher education as a “hook for change” and pathway toward desistance. Yet, as the next section explores, involvement in the program and related student organization at State University helped to mitigate these challenges, as these experiences bonded former offenders to each other and to an institution of higher learning. The student organization formed by program members was predicated upon a social context in which similarly situated individuals interact and encourage one another to replace familiar modes of criminal behavior with those that are unfavorable to it. This was done through participation in ritualistic behaviors intended to promote confidence in the ability to overcome obstacles that may threaten progression away from crime.

The Role of Academic and Social Networks in the Desistance Process

Although some interviewees participated in the related student organization to a greater extent than others, they all had the same access to support networks created by that group and in turn another opportunity to further desistance efforts. More specifically, at the time of the interviews, the eight incoming students had not yet taken full advantage of the social and academic connections afforded program members. Yet, they had attended a few mandatory introductory meetings and from these experiences, were able to discern some potential benefits of program involvement particularly with respect to successful reentry. As Fred, who was an incoming student at the time put it, “seeing the people like the guys who is almost finished with the program when I was at the orientation, it just gives you kinda hope that it can be done.” Contrastingly, Dexter, an upper-level student at the university who helped form the student organization spoke about it from a much broader perspective. He explained that it was separate from the admissions program where “we, you know, we get students that are incarcerated and taking college courses and follow them through the pipelines of the judicial
system.” For Dexter, the purpose of the “student org” was to raise awareness through community service and education.

Both program members and nonmembers were welcome to attend monthly meetings of the organization, a forum to express both general and personal concerns. As Ethan explained, “when we do have like monthly meetings that’s a chance for anybody to get anything off their chest if they have problems and its basically like a real support system there other than your home family.” His parental responsibilities kept him from regularly attending the meetings. Yet, he still viewed the group as a family as he stated, “We’re all connected. We don’t see each other all the time but when we do see each other on campus we talk. Whether it be for five minutes, or ten minutes or one second. It really doesn’t even matter.” Indeed, research participants felt a sense of comfort and acceptance in the presence of other group members. These circumstances compelled them to push beyond social stigma and other barriers and prove their willingness and ability to engage in college-level courses.

For example, Henry was a senior at the university who witnessed the growth of friendships among program members and the ways in which these relationships helped to strengthen personal agency and related efforts to desist from crime. This was because group members felt accountable to one another for their actions and thus took deliberative steps toward the shared goal of obtaining a college degree from State University. As Henry stated,

> The camaraderie between us you know we are surrounded by people who are all striving for the same positive outcome. I think that environment and that camaraderie encourages other people because nobody wants to be the one who goes back to prison, who falls short, who doesn’t do well or who doesn’t make the Dean’s List.

Within this context, peer influences reinforced willful acts in furtherance of higher education and in turn made participants feel less susceptible to criminal pressures especially during what many consider to be a fragile transition from prison back into community settings.

Betty, who is also a senior, acknowledged the crucial timing of the program in the sense that members had the opportunity to bond with similarly situated peers upon release from prison, when their social identities were in limbo. She elaborated upon this perspective:

> I think that having somebody to talk to and having that support system really fulfills a need that needs to be fulfilled, because obviously we’ve all had that need before . . . I feel like most people that do go down to prison, there’s something that you’re missing and so you really develop a bond with people because it’s like everybody that’s down there is missing the same thing. So to be home with those people even if they are or they aren’t missing the same thing, you still can connect with them because you share the same experience.

This account illustrates the key role of shared experiences of former incarceration in shaping postincarceration developments and distinct ways in which these circumstances brought program members together. In essence, this organic support network
also helped research participants establish their new personas as college students and productive members of society.

Enrolling in and attending the same first semester classes was also a shared ritual among incoming students in the program at State University. Over time, this requirement had evolved into a cultural practice where program members were eager to support one another in endeavors both in and out of the classroom. These informal exchanges helped to facilitate bonding as well as the process of learning noncriminal behavior through peer interactions.

For instance, Marcos, who had recently begun his academic career at the university, referred to the program as a “secret society.” He went on to explain, “when I go to class we all kind of sit together. Some of us spread out a little bit.” Albert shared similar sentiments: “The classes are so easy to not go to and they’re so easy to, you know, just, ‘I don’t feel like going today,’ but they kind of encourage you if you need help. There’s always someone to help you.” There seemed to be a mutual willingness among program members to assist one another in transitioning away from crime.

Research participants spent a considerable amount of time with other program members upon their release from incarceration. They learned ways to remain focused on their desistance efforts through their simultaneous interaction with prosocial peers and engagement in higher education. These skills were especially valuable during the postincarceration period, a time when many interviewees were unfamiliar with how to proactively cope with the stigma of incarceration including environmental and social burdens.

Discussion

Life-course transitions are commonly used to explain how the development of key turning points affects individual risks for crime over time. Existing research largely focuses on the mechanisms by which social bonds predicated upon marital and employment relationships inspire legitimate behavior among former criminals. Similarly, with engagement in higher education comes the opportunity to connect with and learn from prosocial peers. Just as individuals with certain personal traits are more likely to maintain marital and employment connections, those who take deliberate actions also tend to attach to higher education and transition away from crime. Involvement in postsecondary carceral education in particular has been linked to behaviors that are not conducive to reoffending (Chappell, 2004). There is scant research describing the specific mechanisms by which higher education received during the postincarceration period can contribute to the cessation of criminal activity.

The in-depth interviews used in this research yielded rich information about identity transformation among former criminals including how this change was propelled by engagement in higher education during and after incarceration which included access to social and academic networks at the university post release. First, these results support existing evidence that incarceration is an experience that often incites an inner will to change. With this in mind, the receipt of higher education was not conceptualized as a turning point per se in this study, as it did not necessarily precede
individual decisions to abandon crime. For instance, some research participants first began to envision a noncriminal life during incarceration and develop a plan in furtherance of this goal through engagement in carceral postsecondary education. In addition, they all considered their postincarceration experiences as college students to be a clear and essential step in that direction. Nonetheless, this potential for change was unequal as it was marred by structural elements of neighborhood disadvantage. Indeed, this was of particular concern for slightly less than half of these ex-offenders, including both persisters and desisters, who returned to live in or near inner cities where they encountered criminogenic people, places, and things on a regular basis, yet still desired to transition away from crime. This finding not only reinforces but also adds to “a fundamental premise . . . that both exposure to a hook and one’s attitude toward it are important elements of successful change” (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002). Indeed, this theoretical framework regarding the relationship between postincarceration experiences and outlooks on crime can be used to understand actual behaviors or possible criminal outcomes. However, it is important to be mindful of how outside factors such as structural inequalities might influence this connection.

In light of these perspectives, I analyzed the storylines (Agnew, 2006) portrayed in each in-depth interview to comprehend the complex relationship between postincarceration experiences, environments, and current outlooks on crime and actions. This connection was not direct, as it was often impeded by prior influences related to arrest, incarceration and postsecondary carceral education. As a result, research participants did not choose to abandon crime post incarceration solely because of their acceptance into the program. Rather, that opportunity was portrayed as strengthening their visions for a crime-free future and, in turn, efforts to avoid crime even when faced with antithetical socioeconomic and environmental pressures.

These findings are relevant to life-course perspectives on crime and desistance. Existing research has focused on the relationships established through marital and employment bonds and how associated levels of social control and social learning may affect involvement in crime (Akers, 2009; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Giordano et al. (2003) suggested that such adulthood transitions may prepare and motivate individuals to engage in generative pursuits. Moreover, this inductive analysis details how that conviction can be sustained through desistance pathways carved out of experiences in a higher education program for formerly incarcerated individuals, which offers access to dense support networks that can help facilitate change through engagement in prosocial routine activities.

Furthermore, this research has important implications for the role of social learning in the desistance process, as it suggests that scholars should consider the specific links between academic rituals and differential association with alternate peer groups during the postincarceration period. Rituals in general have been regarded as mediating agents that provide an emotional buffer against social stigmas (Braithwaite, 1989; Liu & Palermo, 2009; Marshall, 2002; Wong, 2013). Through peer-to-peer relationships, students in the program learned ways to remain focused on transcending their cognitive awareness of the criminal label despite the existence of social barriers that have
been known to have a counteracting effect (Pinard, 2010; Travis, 2006). This finding adds value to limited scholarly attention given to the relationship between learned noncriminal behavior and crime avoidance throughout the life course (Giordano et al., 2003; Sutherland, 1947; Warr, 2002).

Nonetheless, my study does have some limitations. Approximately two thirds of the research participants provided responses that were wholly based on past events. The remaining one third consisted of incoming students and freshmen, individuals who shared more recent postincarceration experiences. Overall, the interviewees were ethnically diverse but the majority (87%) self-identified as non-White. The average age among research participants was 28 years. I carefully considered how these demographics might influence the internal validity of my research. Age graded developments are generally associated with decreased involvement in crime over the life course, but variation in crime type and postincarceration environments must also be accounted for (Farrington, 1986; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; McCall, Land, Dollar, & Parker, 2013; Steffensmeier, Allan, Harer, & Streifel, 1989; Tittle, Ward, & Grasmick, 2003). Although most of the interviewees were well into adulthood, external factors confounded the expected influence of age on the risk of reoffending.

Nine percent of research participants expressed a desire to change but had not completely rejected the possibility of committing a future crime. As Black males, they explained that because of their social ties in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, they might need to use violence to protect themselves or loved ones. The relationship between living in poor black neighborhoods and exposure to crime has been well documented (Anderson, 1999; Clear, 2007). Other interviewees reported a more attenuated affectation toward crime by the time of their respective release dates. Many linked that transition to prior experiences related to arrest, incarceration, and/or carceral education. There was a general consensus among the research participants that such changes were accompanied by emotional and mental maturation indicating the potential for some self-selection into the program.

It may be that my research provides a narrow perspective on how engagement in the program and higher education at State University contribute to the postrelease experiences specifically shared by former and current members. Despite its limitations, my study is of particular import for life-course research as it offers a contextual basis for understanding how exposure to higher education post release can help former offenders remain focused on conventional goals. It adds to research on how noncriminal behavior can be transmitted through social learning that occurs between prosocial peers. Future research should use a longitudinal approach to track the desistance efforts made by former offenders with similar demographics, including both participants and nonparticipants in college programs at 4-year institutions.

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1. Research participants were not directly asked about the timing of their release. That information is missing for nine of them.

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