

# Detangling the agential and structural factors at play in the identity development of young adults in conflict with the law

Marie-Pierre Villeneuve, Ph. D.  
Associate Professor, Université de Sherbrooke

Isabelle F.-Dufour, Ph. D.  
Full Professor, Université Laval

Natacha Brunelle, Ph. D.  
Full Professor, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

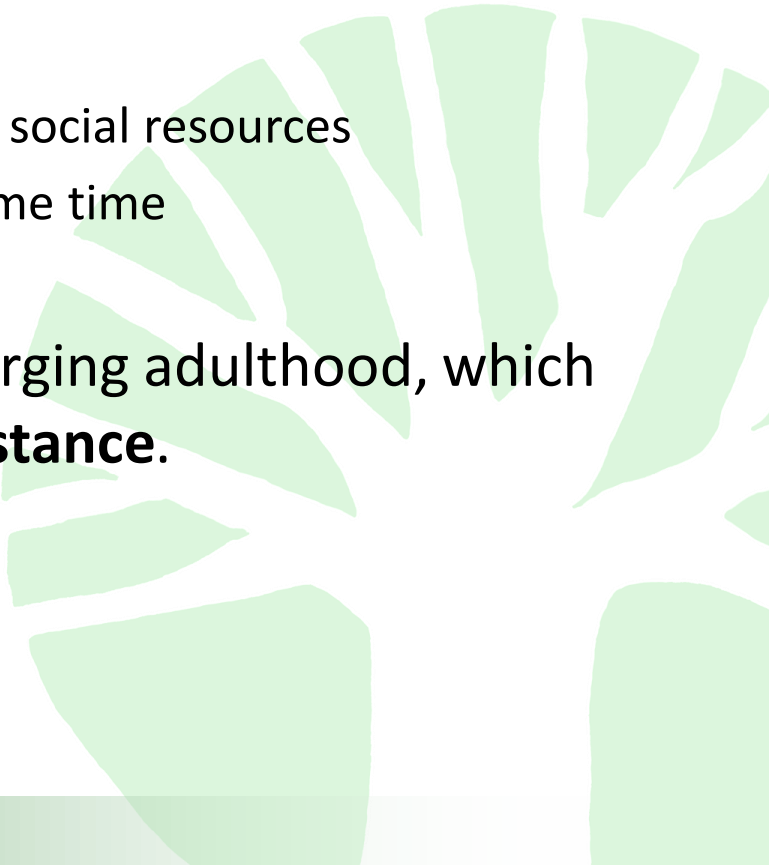


(RÉ)intégration sociocommunautaire  
Partenariat recherche communauté

## Young Adults and Crime in Canada

- Most crimes are committed by young adults aged 18 to 25 years old
  - They usually commit the most serious crimes
- 40% to 65% of young adults in correctional services (e.g., imprisonment, probation) commit another crime in the two years following the end of their sentence.
- For many of them, they further an offending trajectory that started during adolescence.
- Considering identity exploration and formation is an important task in the transition from adolescence into young adulthood, identity processes of judicialized young adults must be better understood.

# Entering Adulthood from a Disadvantaged Starting Point

- Judicialized **emerging adults** are **triple challenged**:
    - Obstacles; structural barriers
    - Limited access to or lack of personal and social resources
    - Multiple transitions happening at the same time
  - **Internal changes** abound during emerging adulthood, which could be especially **favorable to desistance**.
- 

# Identity theory of desistance (ITD)

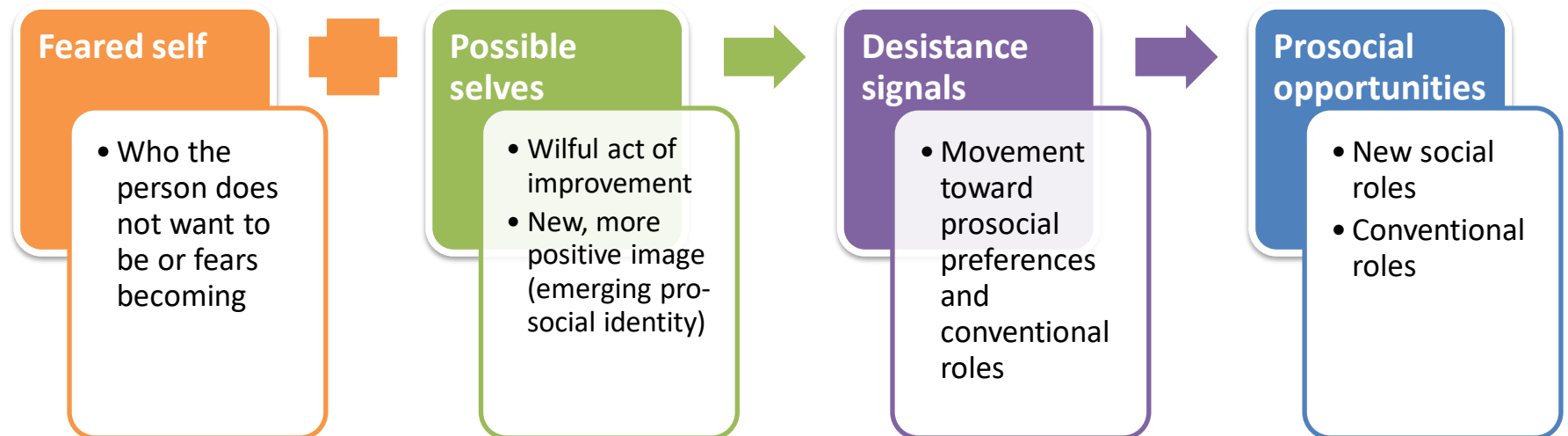
(Paternoster et al., 2015; Paternoster et Bushway, 2009)

- Desistance is an **agentic** process based on **identity changes**, taking place in a **social context**.
- Even the hardest life can be turned around if the person **makes the decision to change**.
  - Actions are purposeful and forethought i.e., guided and motivated by goals and plans for the future
  - People can reflect on their decisions and actions
  - People have the power to act to produce a desired outcome
- An “offender” **working identity** will guide actions as long as its perceived benefits are greater than its costs.
  - Self-serving bias
- For desistance to occur, perceived **failures** and dissatisfactions in one’s life must be **connected** to offending and with **anticipated** future failures.
  - “Crystallization of discontent”

# Identity Theory of Desistance (ITD)

(Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Paternoster et al., 2015)

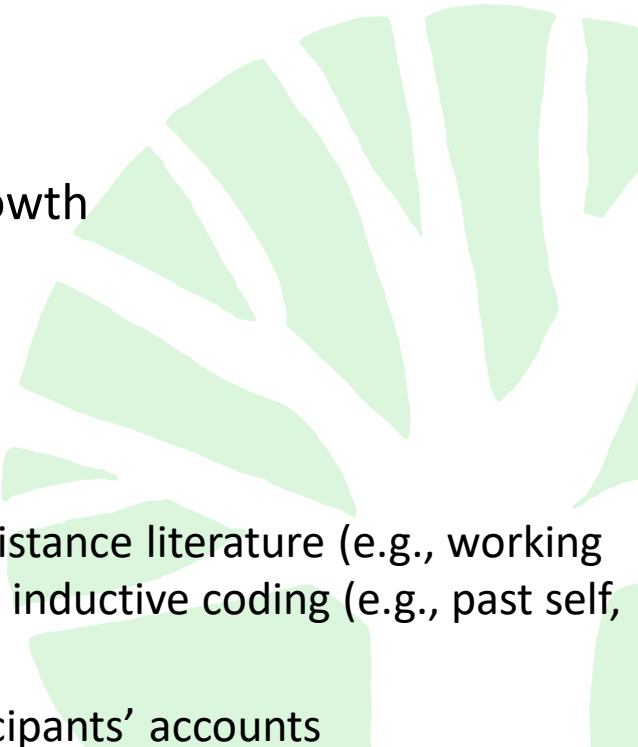
- Identity changes come **first** and initiate changes in preferences and social roles.



# Research Objectives

- Further understand the role of identity in desistance processes of young adults in conflict with the law
  - Describe how these young adults define themselves
  - Explore if and how their sense of self guide their actions
  - Explore if and how structural factors impact their actions

# Methods

- Qualitative **interviews** with judicialized young adults (16-25)
    - (RE)SO 16-35 Partnership Research Program (Axis I; T1)
    - Secondary data analysis
  - **Horizontal** analysis
    - Self-perception, desistance, personal growth
  - **Thematic** analysis
  - **Semi-open coding** (Miles *et al.*, 2018)
    - 1<sup>st</sup> cycle: key concepts of the ITD and the desistance literature (e.g., working self, feared self, prosocial opportunities), and inductive coding (e.g., past self, cost of change, restricted agency)
    - 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle: similarities and differences in participants' accounts
- 

## Sample ( $n=56$ )

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	39	69,6
Female	16	28,6
Non-binary	1	1,8
<b>Age</b>		
16-18	19	33,9
19-25	12	21,4
26-35	25	44,6
<b>Occupational status</b>		
Unemployed	35	62,5
Minimum wage	16	28,6
Part-time	5	8,9
<b>Under judicial control</b>	18	32,1





# **Preliminary Findings**



# 1. Making sense of the good and the bad in their life

- When asked about their **positive qualities**, participants identified intellectual, emotional, behavioral, and relational traits that characterize them, oftentimes by reflecting on **how good their life was and/or still is**.
- More often than not, this appreciation is supported by accounts of **prosocial actions** or **crimefree periods** in their life:

*“I’m **loyal**. I have **respect** for my friends and my family. When people talk to me about their problems, I **listen** to them. I’m there for them, to **help** them, give them advice. I’m a really respectful man. I’m not always mean to others.”*

(Yannick, M, 17)

*“I had a **job**, I earned **money**. I had a **car**, a **girlfriend**.”* (Cyril, M, 24)

# 1. Making sense of the good and the bad in their life

- However, according to some participants, their qualities also played a part in their offending lifestyle:

*“I let people **walk over me** and got **caught up** in crime.” (Eloi, M, 35)*

- Some also reflected on how being exposed to **traumatic experiences** shaped their life and is closely linked to their self-perceptions

*“When I was young, we didn’t have a lot of money. My **mom stole to feed us**. That stuck with me: if you want something, steal it. At 15, I had **lost my whole family**: my mom, my grandmother, my three aunts, my uncle. Our family had a lot of issues: **drug and alcohol abuse, unhealthy relationships**. Because I didn’t know anything else, I thought it was ok. You experience traumas. Having to separate your parents at 4 a.m. because they’re **fighting** and there’s **blood everywhere**. You have to **learn** that you don’t have to follow the same path as they did, that you can **overcome this**.” (Ariane, F, 28)*

## 2. Realizing that offending is no longer desirable

- At some point in their lives, most participants came to the realization that offending and related at-risk behaviors have **negative consequences** in their life.
  - Growing ‘criminal fatigue’
  - Dealing with losses
  - Becoming dissatisfied with how others view them

*“The stupid things I did, I did all in my early 20s. **Now I’m 30.** I’m at a place in my life where I want to **settle down with someone.** I want to be in a stable, long-term relationship. I’m **trying to stay out of trouble.** I don’t want any more problems. The night I spent in **jail**, it was really... jail is really something that I **don’t ever ever ever wanna do again.**” (Leon, M, 30)*

*“Some see me as a thug, a gangster committing crimes. But there’s also a **part of me** that’s really **nice, sociable,** and knows how to **do positive things in life.**”  
(Yannick, M, 17)*

## 2. Realizing that offending is no longer desirable

- For some, this realization was brought about by **turning points** i.e., life events, getting help, becoming an adult.
- Coming to think about offending as no longer desirable **challenged** most participants' **self-perceptions** and their will to stay on an **offending path**.

*“If I go back to my old self, **will it bring me closer to my little girl**? No. It will bring me closer to who I was before: violent, aggressive, manipulative, arrogant.” (Chantal, F, 35)*

*“With time, I realized I’m **better alone** with my anxiety than doing stupid things for money, taking the **risk** of going back to prison, **just to feel loved** by others. (Felix, M, 25)*

### 3. Taking steps toward change

- For most participants, realizing that offending is no longer desirable came hand in hand with their first steps toward change.
  - Moving toward change is voluntary, but sometimes the result of a lack of other options.
- Some participants explained how having a **sense of purpose** helped them **monitor** and **regulate** their behaviors, so they are coherent with their desired “prosocial self”.

*“I can **count on myself**. I am **motivated**. I don’t plan on giving up because it’s going better and better since I’m putting the efforts to change. **Because it’s going well**, it motivates me to **keep doing the same things**, so it keeps going well. [Interviewer: What would you like to keep in your life going forward?] The **ties** I have with my family. My **state of mind**. Keep doing the right things.” (David, M, 25)*

- Just as discontent with an “offender” working identity is a catalyst for change, so is content with a “desister” working identity.

### 3. Taking steps toward change

- Opportunities to turn one's life around are not always seized when people are not ready for change.
- They can become a “source of frustration”, contributing to a sense of “unfairness”, “injustice”, even “oppression”.
- These feelings do not always translate in a greater awareness of the costs of crime – they sometimes justify further offending.

*“I had an intense feeling of **injustice**. I ended up **pleading guilty to things I didn't do**. When I got out of jail, **I got my revenge**. I ended up going back in **jail**. When you're in, you never get out. **It changes you**. You have to survive, protect yourself. Either you live, you survive, or you die. I did certain things to assert my authority. The more you commit crime, the more you become addicted to this lifestyle. **I came to like it, to consider it normal to go to jail, get out, get back in.**” (Emile, M, 24)*

## 4. Facing obstacles to agency

- Despite coming to view offending as no longer desirable and taking steps toward change, most participants recounted how their **agency was restricted** at some point or another in their journey toward desistance.
- **Unresolved issues** can have a “**narrowing effect**” on possible selves by shaping orientations and time horizon:

*“For the **past three years**, I’ve tried to **get out of the criminal world**. **Drugs always bring me back** to it. I end up having debts and going back to committing crimes to reimburse them or whatever... It’s a **vicious cycle**. I’m **trying** the best that I can, one small step at a time. [...] I don’t have big plans. I **forgot my dreams** a long time ago.” (Axel, M, 21)*

*“I **don’t** picture myself **in the future**. It’s not good to see yourself in the future. You must live in the present. **Why make plans?** What if they don’t amount to anything? I **live in the present**. I never lived in the future. That’s what I learned in therapy. Tomorrow, I could be dead. I don’t know.” (Yvan, M, 30)*



## 4. Facing obstacles to agency

- Offending and judicialization also have long-lasting negative consequences.
- Most participants also faced **structural barriers** which impeded their sense of agency and limited the actualisation of a new ‘prosocial’ self:

*“I don’t have a lot of hobbies. I’d like to take up snowboarding again, but **I don’t have the money**. I’d like to be a soccer coach for kids, like I once was. With a **criminal record**, I was told it would be impossible, even though my crimes have nothing to do with kids. I’d like to go to the gym. I thought about it a lot, but **I’ve got to use my money for other things**. I have **debts**. I need to buy things, pay my bills: phone, rent, driver’s license, car, furniture. I have a really **hard time to pay for hobbies**. I find it really hard. **I get discouraged**. I’m like fu\*\* off. I’ll end up relapsing and telling myself: Enjoy!” (Adrien, M, 31)*

*“I’m on a good path. Things are looking up. I have a **job**, a **new girlfriend**, **money**. Everything is going right. I find that by always **bringing up the past**, my problems **stop my progression** toward something that could be better.” (Jerome, M, 29)*

## 4. Facing obstacles to agency

- A restricted sense of agency may be a cost of crime:
  - Revoked driver's license = limited job opportunities, fewer possibilities to get a promotion, job loss
  - Financial pressure (debts, legal fees, fines) = revert to committing lucrative crimes
  - Judicial sanctions = conformity vs desired self

*"I've been in the youth center for a year. I want to get out of here and stop doing stupid things **not because I want to stop, but because I want to get out of there.**" (Mathias, M, 16)*

*"I'm in the process of community re-entry and **they do not see me 100% as a citizen** yet. When my **record is cleared** in 5-6 years, **maybe then I'll consider myself a citizen.** Successful re-entry is to continue doing what I'm doing now."  
(Charles, M, 32).*

## 5. Looking forward

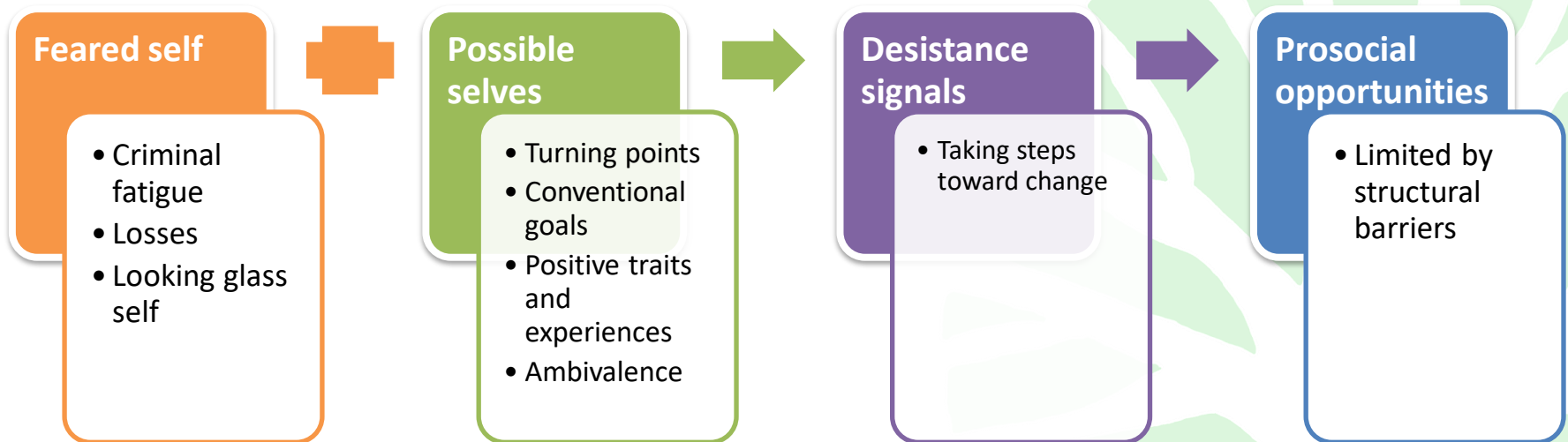
- Many were **cautious**, talking in uncertain terms considering life's unpredictability, adopting a "day-to-day" outlook on life.
- Even though they do not know what or who they want to desist into, many were clear on what they **did not want** their life to look like in the future:

*"I don't know where I see myself, but I know what I want to have. I wish to keep working where I'm at, having more responsibilities, my own apartment. That's what I see. I don't need anything complicated. I want to have my routine, my weekends, going to see my family, travel." (Aline, W, 34)*

*"I don't know yet what I want to do. I know I want a dog soon. I know I will go back home. I would like to not start selling drugs again, I would like not to start using again. I'm still afraid of starting to use again. I used 2/3 of my life. All of that makes me uncertain about my future." (Helen, W, 27)*

## Discussion

- The ITD provides a **useful framework** to gain insight into judicialized young adults' desistance processes.
  - How do they define themselves? Are self-perceptions related to prosocial actions? Are there structural obstacles impeding such actions.



## Discussion

- Despite facing difficult life circumstances, participants' self-perceptions were not only marred with their traumatic past. Most of them rather juggle with **both a negative and a positive self-perception**.
- At one point or another in their life, participants came to **reassess the benefits** of maintaining their involvement in an offending 'lifestyle'.
- Even though the costs of crime come to be perceived as being rather steep, **structural barriers** can make it **harder to project oneself** in the future, especially when constantly reminded of past actions.
  - Also: limit possibilities to forge positive self-perceptions

# Implications

- **External forces** can contribute to a shift in how people think about themselves and whether crime still pays.
- Devise policies and implement practices susceptible to **generate positive life experiences**
  - Be mindful of potential frustrations that might arise from structural barriers
- A broad **range of services** must be put in place to foster hope that change is possible and support identity changes.
- **Prosocial opportunities** must be offered to sustain cognitive shifts
- More **research** is needed to better understand the interaction between prosocial opportunities and the feared self
  - Can they contribute to the change process before identity changes take place?
  - Can conformity/compliance morph into intrinsic motivation?

## Thank you!

- For more information, please feel free to contact me:
  - [marie-pierre.Villeneuve@usherbrooke.ca](mailto:marie-pierre.Villeneuve@usherbrooke.ca)
- To know more about (RE)SO 16-35 and our upcoming publication:
  - Reso1635.ca

