

Desistance from Sex Offending: Alternatives to Throwing Away the Keys

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If one set out to design an intervention program to encourage criminals to reoffend, what would it look like? It should include the converse of what helps offenders desist from crime. It should isolate offenders from prosocial influences and opportunities for good jobs or relationships. It should remind them that they are hopelessly flawed and will never succeed. In this way, it would encourage alienation and helplessness, the “condemnation script” that Maruna (2001) found among men who persist in crime.

Paradoxically, these are the very ingredients of many government-sponsored treatment programs for sex offenders. At the facility where anthropologist Lacombe (2008) conducted ethnographic research, for example, the mantra was “once a sex offender, always a sex offender.” Offenders were trained to vigilantly monitor their every thought for hints of omnipresent risk. Their progress and potential for release depended on confessing “deviant fantasies” that put them at risk of reoffending. Through a harrowing indoctrination process, they were transformed from ordinary criminals into beings entirely “consumed with sex.”

This dominant conception of sex offenders as uniquely dangerous and persistent menaces is borne out neither by their recidivism rates, which are relatively low overall, nor by social science knowledge about criminality. Indeed, the single most robust finding of two centuries of criminological research is that desistance from crime is near universal. As they age, criminals stop offending. This holds true across all eras, cultures, and offender groups. Sex offenders are not exempt from this pattern. As their libidos decline, they too settle down or burn out. Unfortunately, these truths have difficulty filtering down into the muddy waters of the sex-offender industry.

After many decades in the sex-offender field, scholars D. Richard Laws and Tony Ward say it is time for a new paradigm. In their book, *Desistance from Sex Offending: Alternatives to Throwing Away the Keys*, they say that we must acknowledge that much of what passes for treatment of sex offenders is intrusive, dehumanizing, and more properly considered punishment than therapy.

A key aim of *Desistance* is to bridge the looming chasm between an insular, risk-obsessed fringe of forensic psychology and the field of criminology, with its theory of criminal desistance. Their Good Lives Model (GLM), the authors hope, is just the model to steer sex-offender rehabilitation in a more positive direction.

Desistance draws heavily from the seminal work of Sampson & Laub (1993, 2003), who conducted the most comprehensive longitudinal study of criminals. Following a group of criminals from the ages of 10 to 70, they found that individual traits and childhood experiences cannot accurately predict desistance. Rather, the key is seemingly random “turning points,” such as landing a good job or finding a good partner.

Maruna’s (2001) classic study advanced Sampson and Laub’s work, highlighting the role of individual agency in prosocial transformation. Maruna found that offenders who went straight forged a new narrative for their lives. This prosocial “redemption script” stood in contrast to the hopeless, alienated “condemnation script” of offenders who persisted in crime.

The first half of *Desistance* provides an excellent, readable survey of the criminological literature on desistance, the age-crime curve, and offender reintegration research. The authors then offer up the Good Lives Model as a way to refocus treatment on ex-offenders’ strengths rather than deficits. Instead of regarding people who have committed sex offenses as “moral strangers” and “bearers of risk” who must be rigidly controlled and monitored, they argue, we should engage with them as fellow human beings who have taken a wrong turn.

A rehabilitation theory rather than a psychological one, GLM focuses less on therapy than on the real-world needs of desisting offenders. These needs include finding meaningful work, entering good relationships, and strengthening bonds with family and community. Crime desistance occurs naturally once an offender is able to obtain his “primary goods” through legal means, the theory posits. Thus, a respect for offenders’ autonomy leads to greater engagement and ultimately a safer community.

This humanist message is central to the emergent restorative justice movement of which Good Lives is a part. This approach also resonates with what we know from therapy outcome research. The therapeutic alliance, neglected in many correctional settings, is a primary mechanism of therapeutic change. People respond positively when others demonstrate care and a belief in their potential to turn their lives around.

An essential shortcoming of the dominant Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model from Canada is its failure to take such basic principles of individual agency into account, argue Laws and Ward. Developing historically in the wake of the infamous “nothing works” era of the 1970s, RNR and other “evidence-based practices” elevate measurable results over principles of social justice or human rights. With its deficit-driven language of static and dynamic risk factors and criminogenic needs, RNR condemns ex-offenders as dangerous objects to be managed and controlled.

Indeed, the entire psychometric risk-assessment industry is premised on the idea that offenders, and not their environments, are the sole sites of risk. Such a conceptualization, Laws and Ward point out, fails to appreciate both changes that occur

outside of formal treatment, and also how correctional policies that isolate ex-offenders can elevate risk by cutting off avenues for successful reintegration.

Rather than abandoning RNR, the authors suggest expanding it with Good Lives principles. However, the idiographic, client-centered approach of the Good Lives Model is in many ways antipathous to RNR's nomothetic focus on actuarial risk and homogenous interventions. Indeed, this contrast is a major appeal of Good Lives. Within the ranks of those administering bureaucratic risk management under the guise of "treatment," we hear increasingly vocal whispers of disillusionment and disenchantment. These programs dehumanize and alienate not only the offender but also the clinician, who is reduced to nothing more than a technician mechanically administering a one size-fits-all indoctrination program to the hopeless.

The powerful concluding section on ethics touches on this dual dehumanization process. Inflicting unjustified punishment disguised as treatment, such as harsh and confrontational challenges, is abusive and unethical (see also Ward, 2010). In contrast, "treating offenders with respect and decency rather than as sources of contamination to be quarantined (not cured) is likely to make us better people and lessen the risk that we might acquire some of the vices we despise" (p. 283).

This is a trailblazing book, and essential reading for clinicians, researchers, academicians, attorneys, and anyone interested in the application of desistance theory to sex-offender rehabilitation. Although the movement is still in its infancy, and outcome research is just starting to accumulate, professional interest is a sign that the reign of penal harm may be losing steam, creating opportunities for progressive reforms (Cullen, in press).

That's the optimistic view. More pessimistically, the punitive orientation of sex-offender treatment programs may be so deeply entrenched that it is impervious to change. If only lip service is given to its theory of desistance, within the same old manualized and pathologizing discourse of deviance, distortion, and crime cycles, the Good Lives Model may end up co-opted as yet another manualized technique for "fixing" offenders (Porporino, 2008).

Let us hope, instead, that we are indeed at a turning point in correctional rehabilitation. If the spirit of reform truly catches on, we will be able to look back at the current iatrogenic practices in the sex-offender treatment industry and laugh about their lunacy.

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