CABINET



Australian National University

Pathways Out of the Criminal Justice System

Listening to Lived Experience From the Australian Capital Territory

Hayley Boxall and Lorana Bartels

CABINET

CABINET

Crime and Social Justice
hayley.boxall@anu.edu.au

The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600 Australia
www.anu.edu.au

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University)
CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C

CABINET

CABINET

Contents

1. Introduction 9
1.1 Background 9
1.2 Structure of this report 10
2. Literature review – What is desistance? 11
2.2 Supported desistance 16
2.3 Desistance within diverse communities 17
2.3 Summary 19
3. Methods 20
3.1 Recruitment 20
3.2 Survey 20
3.3 Semi-structured interviews 23
3.4 Ethics 25
3.5 Defining desistance stage 25
4. Catalysts for and barriers to change 28
4.1 Cognitive shifts 28
4.2 Maturation 33
4.3 Relationships 35
4.4 External factors 46
4.5 Health and wellbeing 55
4.6 Contact with the criminal justice system 62
4.7 Service engagement 71
5. The power of combinations 78
5.1 Co-occurrence of catalysts for change 79
5.2 Co-occurrence of barriers to change 84
6. Desistance pathways by gender and Indigeneity 87
6.1 Gender 87
6.2 Indigenous status 91

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

7. Predicting desistance 97
7.1 Sociodemographic characteristics 97
7.2 AOD issues 98
7.2 Mental health 98
7.3 Family and community connections 98
7.4 Offending history 99
7.5 Catalysts and barriers to change 100
8. Discussion and conclusion 102
8.1 Key messages 102
8.2 Implications for the ACT: Building a service system that supports desistance 112
9. References 117
10. Appendix 124

Figures

Figure 1: Proportion of survey participants who identified self-efficacy as a catalyst and/or barrier for change (%) 29
Figure 2: Proportion of survey participants who said feared selves was a catalyst for change, and/or the emotional rewards of offending was a barrier for change (%) 30
Figure 3: Proportion of survey participants who identified maturation as a catalyst for change (%) 33
Figure 4: Proportion of survey participants who identified children as a catalyst for change (%) 35
Figure 5: Family members as facilitators or barriers to desistance, by family member type (%) 38
Figure 6: Proportion of survey participants who identified family as a catalyst and/or barrier for change (%) 39
Figure 7: Proportion of survey participants who said their family members made it harder for them to stop offending, by familial offending (%) 40
Figure 8: Proportion of survey participants who identified friends as a catalyst for and/or barrier to change (%) 41

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Figure 9: Proportion of survey participants who identified current or former intimate partners as a catalyst and/or barrier to change (%) 44

Figure 10: Proportion of survey participants who identified employment as a catalyst and/or barrier for change (%) 46

Figure 11: Proportion of survey participants who identified community as a catalyst or barrier for change (%) 51

Figure 12: Prevalence of drug use, disability and mental health conditions among survey participants (%) 56

Figure 13: Proportion of survey participants who identified AOD issues as a barrier to change and/or reducing AOD use as a catalyst for change (%) 60

Figure 14: Offending histories of survey participants (%) 62

Figure 15: Proportion of survey participants who identified justice system involvement as a catalyst and/or barrier for change (%) 63

Figure 16: Service engagement among survey participants (%) 71

Figure 17: Service engagement among survey participants, by whether they supported desistance (%) 72

Figure 19: Heat map of correlations between catalysts for change..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 20: Heat map of correlations between catalysts for change..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 21: Catalysts for change identified by survey participants, by gender (%) 88

Figure 22: Barriers for change identified by survey participants, by gender (%) 89

Figure 23: Service engagement in past five years and whether supported desistance, by gender (%) 90

Figure 24: Catalysts for change identified by survey participants, by Indigenous status (%) 92

Figure 25: Barriers for change identified by survey participants, by Indigenous status (%) 93

Figure 26: Service engagement in past five years and whether supported desistance, by Indigenous status (%) 95

Figure 27: AOD issues, by desistance stage (%) 98

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C

CABINET

CABINET

Figure 28: Unpaid care activities undertaken by participants, by desistance stage (%) 99

Figure 29: Age of first being proceeded against or pleading guilty to an offence, by desistance stage (%) 100

Tables

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of survey participants (*n*; %) 23

Table 2: Sociodemographic characteristics of interview and focus group participants 25

Table 3: Description of survey participant groups 26

Table 4: Description of survey participant groups 27

Table 5: Catalysts for and barriers to change domains 78

Table 6: Sociodemographic characteristics of survey participants, by desistance stage (%) 97

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C

CABINET

CABINET

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the support and generosity of many organisations and individuals. We are especially grateful to our community-based partners — the Aboriginal Legal Service, ACT Legal Aid, MensLink, OneLink, Prisoners Aid and Yeddung Mura — who promoted the project by displaying flyers in their offices, circulating information through newsletters, and sharing posts on their social media channels. Their efforts ensured that people across the community were aware of the opportunity to take part.

We would also like to thank ACT Corrective Services and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate (JACS). Their assistance in displaying posters in community corrections offices and other facilities helped extend the project's reach to people engaged with justice services in community settings. JACS also provided valuable input throughout all stages of the project, and we are grateful for their patience, responsiveness and commitment to supporting this work.

We further acknowledge the contributions of Professors Beth Weaver, Shadd Maruna and Fergus McNeill, as well as the Aboriginal Legal Service and Dwayne Antojado, for their thoughtful insights and feedback on early drafts of the survey tool. Finally, we extend our deepest thanks to the survey and interview participants, who so generously shared their time, experiences and perspectives to inform this project.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Acronyms

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ACTCS	ACT Corrective Services
ANU	Australian National University
AOD	alcohol and other drugs
FVO	Family Violence Order
IP	internet protocol
JACS	ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate
LGB+	lesbian, gay, bisexual and other
POLIS	POLIS@ANU: The Centre for Social Policy Research
QR	Quick Response
RR25BY25	Reducing Recidivism by 25% by 2025
VPN	virtual private network
WWVP	Working with Vulnerable People

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

1. Introduction

Recidivism remains one of the most persistent challenges for justice systems worldwide. In the ACT, around one in three people released from prison return within two years, reflecting the ongoing difficulty of supporting people to build stable, crime-free lives. At the same time, the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in ACT prisons is the highest in the country, underscoring how structural inequalities continue to shape pathways into and out of the justice system.

These figures highlight both a challenge and an opportunity. They point to the limits of relying solely on punitive responses and to the importance of understanding what actually helps people to stop offending — and what stands in their way. Reducing reoffending is not just about lowering crime rates; it is about creating the conditions for people to rebuild their lives, reconnect with families and communities, and find purpose beyond the justice system.

The Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System (POCS) project was designed to do just that. Built on the premise that those who have lived through cycles of offending and change hold crucial insights into what works, this research captures local evidence about how services, systems and personal factors intersect to influence desistance in the ACT.

1.1 Background

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT), represented by the Justice and Community Safety Directorate (JACS), has partnered with the Australian National University (ANU), through POLIS@ANU: The Centre for Social Policy Research (POLIS, formerly the Centre for Social Research and Methods), to undertake a body of research to support the Reducing Recidivism Plan, which aims to reduce recidivism in the ACT by 25% by 2025 (RR25by25; ACT Government, 2020). However, many researchers, practitioners and advocates agree that 'recidivism alone is a poor metric for gauging the success of criminal justice interventions or of those who participate in them' (Klingele, 2019, p. 769). This is because recidivism is an 'event': the recurrence or non-recurrence of crime during a defined timeframe. However, behaviour change processes – referred to here as *desistance* – re complex and can involve periods of relapse and remission. While there is obviously significant value in recidivism research, its ability to provide insight into the factors involved in broader processes of desistance is limited.

Desistance theory and research aim to understand why people who offend cease doing so and how they maintain their desistance on a day-to-day basis. In this context, it is relevant to note that the formerly incarcerated people interviewed by Shadd Maruna in his seminal 2001 study often referred to 'making good' (Maruna, 2001) – so desistance research often examines how and why some people 'make good', while others do not.

The POCS project was developed to deepen understanding of the factors that promote desistance, and increase risk of reoffending (i.e., persistence) in the ACT. It followed a mixed-methods design, combining a survey and semi-structured interviews with people who had pleaded guilty to or been found guilty of an offence in the ACT within the past five years. The data collected offer ACT-specific insights into how different parts of the justice and support systems interact with one another — and with justice-involved individuals — to bring about and sustain behaviour change. The specific research aims of the project are to identify:

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

1. factors associated with desistance and persistence of involvement with the criminal justice system;
2. the role of programs and initiatives provided in the ACT in supporting desistance processes; and
3. gaps in existing services and programs delivered in the ACT that could support people to desist.

1.2 Structure of this report

The report is structured as follows:

- *Literature review:* a synthesis of existing research on desistance, including theoretical frameworks, and how desistance processes differ across diverse communities.
- *Methods*: provides a description of the mixed-methods approach, including survey design, recruitment, validation, and analysis.
- *Findings:* information from the analysis if the surveys and interviews are presented across several thematic areas:
    - *Catalysts and barriers for change* – the individual, relational, and structural factors that participants identified as supporting or hindering their desistance journeys.
    - *The power of combinations* – how catalysts and barriers intersect and co-occur, including insights from the correlation analysis and heat map visualisations.
    - *Desistance pathways by gender and Indigeneity* – describes the consistencies and variations in the desistance pathways of male and female participants, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants.
    - *Predicting desistance* – comparative analysis of stable desisters, emerging desisters, and persisters, highlighting the factors that appear most influential in shaping long-term desistance.
- *Discussion*: interpretation of findings in light of theory and policy, with particular attention to the ACT context. Description of the key implications for policy and practice, and directions for future work.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

2. Literature review – What is desistance?

In attempting to understand why some people who offend make good and others do not, five primary frameworks have been proposed by desistance researchers:

- *ontogenetic* models: as individuals age, they become less able to commit crimes,
- *sociogenic* models: people respond to environmental and situational forces,
- *agentic* (also known as *subjective* or *phenomenological*) models: people are active agents of change, taking purposive steps to alter their behaviour, attitudes and identities,
- *relational* models*:* motivation to desist, and maintenance of desistance, is informed by interactions with others, and the extent to which we are able to reintegrate back into the community, and
- *integrated* models, which involve the consideration of ontogenetic, sociogenic, agentic and relational factors, as part of the desistance process.

2.1.1 Ontogenetic models of desistance – maturing out of crime

Within the literature, researchers primarily associate ontogenetic models of desistance with the work of Gottfredson and Hirschi, who argued that the effect of age on involvement in crime was stable and constant across populations (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). As they put it, 'with the exception of minor fluctuation in mode, the essential feature of the age distribution is extraordinary stability' (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983, p. 572).

Hirschi and Gottfredson primarily attributed individuals' involvement in offending to low levels of self-control, which, they considered to be established during the early stages of life and remained constant over time (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). However, Hirschi and Gottfredson also pointed to the ageing of the organism, suggesting that propensity for crime became overshadowed by declining levels of ability (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983).

The role of age and maturation on desistance has been critiqued as over-simplistic, and so has for a long time, been minimised in discussions about desistance processes (Farrall et al., 2014). However, this has started to change, with academics like Rocque encouraging desistance researchers to re-engage with ontogenetic theories of desistance (Rocque, 2015), but to take a broader view than Hirschi and Gottfredson did of the mechanisms that may underpin the observed relationship between age and crime, as well as variations in these general trends.[1] This includes changes in life circumstances, cognitive development, and the development of social bonds.

The Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM) also provides a useful framework for understanding maturation in desistance processes (DiClemente & Prochaska, 1998). TTM posits that individuals progress through a series of stages, in order for change to occur, with each stage representing the individual's varying (but increasing) levels of motivation and willingness to alter their behaviour and take agentic action to bring about the desired change. These stages are:

1

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

- **precontemplation:** the person has no intention of changing their behaviour,
- **contemplation:** they are interested in changing, but have made no commitment to action,
- **preparation:** they are committed to change and making active decisions about how to facilitate the change process,
- **action:** they actively attempt to modify behaviours/experiences or their environment to overcome problem behaviours, and
- **maintenance:** they have achieved change and are now focused on maintaining this.

The further along the continuum of stages an individual is, the more likely they are to desist. Although developed in the alcohol and other drug (AOD) field, the model maps closely onto desistance research, particularly the idea that people become 'ready' to change at different points in their lives and that this readiness is shaped by both internal and external pressures.

2.1.2 Sociogenic models of desistance – social forces influencing change

Sociogenic models of desistance argue that criminal behaviours change over the life course, depending on the individual's situation, life events and environment (Doherty & Ensminger, 2013; Warr, 1998). The most widely cited example of this school of thought is Laub and Sampson's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control. Centred on the analysis of longitudinal datasets originally collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, in relation to 500 delinquent male adolescents interviewed at ages 25 and 32 (Glueck & Glueck, 1950), and then again at 70 (Sampson & Laub, 2003). Laub and Sampson's central thesis was that desistance is brought about by 'turning points', defined as 'an alteration or deflection in a long-term pathway or trajectory that was initiated at an earlier point in time' (Sampson & Laub, 2005, p. 16). Commonly identified turning points included marriage, having children, attending reform school and enrolling in military service (Laub & Sampson, 1993).

Critically, turning points were characterised as 'chance events' that occurred in the absence of any agentic moves by the offender (Laub et al., 1998, p. 225). As such, the offender's role in desistance was largely passive, with changes in behaviour brought about by the influence of situational and environmental factors they had little or no role in facilitating (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014).

In explaining why turning points brought about desistance within their sample of (former) offenders, Laub and Sampson suggested that major life events, such as getting married or having children, created attachments to and investments in conventional social bonds and institutions (Laub & Sampson, 1993, 2001). These social bonds made crime more costly – if someone offended, they could lose their job or their partner could leave them (Laub et al., 1998; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014; Warr, 1998). Alternatively, Warr suggested that it was not marriage or other turning points *per se* or the bonds that are formed with others that reduced crime, but their effect on re-organising the person's social relationships and routines (Warr, 1998). In essence - people becomes too busy to engage in offending, and/or their social networks change as a result of marriage and children.

2.1.3 Agentic models of desistance – people as agents of their own change

While acknowledging the importance of social structures in understanding pathways in and out of crime, agentic models place the individual at the centre of the analysis, exploring the

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

cognitive work they undertake at different stages of the desistance process. Despite significant variation across agentic models of desistance, several key themes can be identified.

First, the desistance process typically involves the person who has been involved in offending re-assessing their current situation and life. This can be triggered by negative events linked to their engagement in crime (e.g., victimisation, imprisonment, the loss of family and/or relationship dissolution) (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Vaughan, 2006). These events are disorienting and distressing and may serve as a motivation to consider the benefits and consequences associated with their offending lifestyle (Vaughan, 2006). Another trigger for this deliberation process could include being presented with a 'hook for change' (e.g., an employment offer or a non-offending romantic partner), which may in turn facilitate the evocation of a 'replacement self' (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1000). Some authors have also highlighted the role of third parties (e.g., family members and friends) in triggering the re-evaluation process, which can be due to the person becoming aware of or imagining that others think badly of them, because of their criminal behaviour (Farrall et al., 2014; Vaughan, 2006; Weaver, 2012; Weaver & McNeill, 2015).

Second, many agentic models involve some consideration of the role of identity change (or re-imagining of identity) in the desistance process. This typically involves the replacement (or reinterpretation) of past criminal selves for more pro-social and positive future selves. For example, Paternoster and Bushway suggested that desisters are able to link their current negative circumstances to their criminal working identities, which are then projected into the future as a 'feared self' (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1119). This feared self could be the person who they imagine they will be in the future, if they continue to offend and do not change their lives.

As a result, the desister is therefore motivated to take purposeful action, to avoid this feared self and work towards other, more positive possible selves. Rather than creating a replacement self, Maruna's analysis of the 'redemption scripts' of desisting offenders suggested that they were adept at 'mining' their past for evidence that supported their current views of themselves (and associated narratives) as essentially good people whose deviance was a response to a set of circumstances largely outside their control (Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Ramsden, 2004; Maruna & Roy, 2007). In particular, these narratives frame the cessation of crime as consistent with their real self rather than an abrupt departure. (Maruna, 2001). As Maruna argued, 'Instead of discovering a "new me", the desisting ex- offender reaches back into early experiences to find and re-establish an "old me" in order to desist' (Maruna, 2001, p. 88).

Finally, interwoven with the role of changing identities (or self-narratives) is the idea that desisting offenders need to be able to envision a future, where they are not engaged in offending (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). This means that they require a level of self-efficacy or human capital and control over their lives (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Farrall et al., 2014; Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). For example, Maruna's comparison of the narratives of persistent and desisting offenders found that the former adopted a 'condemnation script', viewing their circumstances as beyond their control and/or too complex to overcome, and their situation as unchangeable, in contrast with the desisters, who constructed the redemption scripts described above and envisaged a meaningful future (Maruna, 2001, 2010).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

2.1.4 Relational models – the role of community connections

Traditional desistance frameworks - ontogenetic, sociogenic and agentic - have typically minimised or downplayed the role of third parties in the lives of desisters. This includes family members, intimate partners, friends, colleagues and other community members. This has started to change, with desistance researchers like Beth Weaver and Fergus McNeill arguing that relationships are central to the desistance journeys of some individuals. McNeill argues that reintegration back into the community is another form of desistance (so-called tertiary desistance), involving alignment between the values and norms of the desister and the broader community (McNeill, 2016).

In understanding the role of relationships in desistance journeys, researchers have pointed to several key mechanisms:

- *Identity formation:* Identity formation (including the development of new non-offending identities) necessarily involves interaction with others; we understand who we are and our place in the world, through our interactions with others (Ugelvik, 2022). So, if someone who has been involved in offending is surrounded by people who believe they are capable of change, then they are more likely to think so as well and take agentic actions to achieve that future self.
- *Relational goods:* Desisters may desire to maintain access to 'relational goods' that are inherent within community bonds and relationships, (Barr, 2019; Weaver & McNeill, 2015) not wish to disappoint the people who place their trust and belief in them (Ugelvik, 2022), and can see their reformed self in their interactions with the community.
- *Structural supports:* Community connections and relationships can provide structural supports that may underpin desisters journeys, such as housing, employment and financial aid.

Desistance researchers have also described the role of relationships and community connections as providing opportunities for generativity. Generativity is defined as:

> *The concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation, manifested through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and generating products and outcomes that aim to benefit youth and foster the development and well-being of individuals and social systems that will outlive the self (McAdam & de St Aubin, 1998, p. 87 cited in Maruna & McNeill, 2007).*

Being perceived as a contributing member of the community in desistance processes – is implicit in the concept of 'making good'. For some, this simply involves a commitment to not offend in the future, but for many it involves going further, to redeem themselves in the eyes of the community, and give something back. Generative activities can take a range of forms, the most common being caring for elderly or disabled family members, intimate partners and children (Barr, 2019; Halsey & Harris, 2011; LeBel et al., 2015). Studies have also found that, for some desisters, 'giving back' involves working with people already in, or at risk of being involved in, the criminal justice system. This may take the form of informal activities, such as supporting people in prison to improve their literacy, or supporting other family members who are incarcerated (Halsey & Harris, 2011; LeBel et al., 2015), through to more formal roles, as peer mentors, social workers and alcohol and drug counsellors (Maruna, 2001; Nixon, 2020).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

In his seminal study involving interviews with 50 male offenders in the United Kingdom, Maruna observed that, relative to persisters, desisters were involved in various forms of generative activities (Maruna, 2001). He argued that focusing on helping others supported desistance journeys through various mechanisms. In particular, helping others can be rewarding and empowering, and make formerly incarcerated people feel good about themselves, helping to fill the 'void' left by criminal behaviours (Halsey & Harris, 2011; LeBel et al., 2015; McNeill & Maruna, 2007). Further, generative activities can contribute to the development of a new non-criminalised identity, which some desistance scholars argue is integral for desistance to occur (Gadd, 2006; Giordano et al., 2002). In turn, generative activities can serve as an effective signal to society that the formerly incarcerated person has changed and is 'worthy' of their investment and forgiveness.

2.1.5 Integrated desistance models

Although previous reviews of desistance frameworks have cast sociogenic and agentic models as in conflict with one another, most desistance scholars acknowledge the importance of considering both agentic and structural factors in the desistance process (Farrall et al., 2014). Even Laub and Sampson, in later works, extended their analyses to hypothesise that the formation of social bonds could impact desistance, by encouraging offenders to accept new pro-social roles and identities that come with different expectations and behaviours (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

The works of Giordano, Farrall and Bottoms are explicit attempts to integrate agentic and sociogenic models of desistance. For example, while acknowledging the importance of the offender's desire to change in desistance processes, Giordano and colleagues argued that offender motivation was mediated by their access to key structures and resources (Giordano et al., 2002, 2003). In particular, they suggested that offender motivation is more important in situations where they do not have easy access to pro-social structures and systems, such as employment, and less important, when offenders have higher levels of social capital.

Further, Bottoms and colleagues have described an integrated model of desistance, comprised of five components:

- *programmed potential:* background factors that increase or decrease the risk of offending (e.g., age, gender, past behaviour),
- *structures:* external social forces that facilitate or constrain their actions (e.g., relationships, employment),
- *culture and habitus:* social assumptions, beliefs and patterns of behaviours internalised by members (e.g., gender roles, attitudes towards offending, and masculinity),
- *situational contexts:* Circumstances and spaces that increase or decrease the likelihood of offending (e.g., the level of crime in a neighbourhood, peer networks, intoxication), and
- *agency:* the intentions and motivations of the individual (Bottoms, 2006; Bottoms et al., 2004; Bottoms & Shapland, 2011).

Within this framework, the authors argued that offenders bring an intention to desist into a social context that challenges and supports that decision to varying extents (Bottoms et al., 2004).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

2.2 Supported desistance

The previous sections present a range of theories developed since the 1950s about how and why some people stop offending. Although linked with both sociogenic and agentic theories, the role of institutional players (e.g., corrections staff and parole officers) had until relatively recently received little attention. However, this has started to change, with research now confirming that justice system actors, such as probation officers and social workers, can support (or assist) desistance (Ugelvik, 2022). Villeneuve et al. undertook a scoping review on assisted desistance and identified the following themes from the 26 papers examined:

- formal assistance is important in the early stages of desistance,
- formal interventions can provide structure for moving forward and setting the stage for change,
- formal agents can also provide a sense of security and facilitate re-socialisation,
- there is a need to balance rehabilitation and surveillance, and
- formal agents can support changes in self-narratives (Villeneuve et al., 2021).

Based on these findings, Villeneuve et al. suggested that tertiary desistance could be an underlying mechanism sustaining change efforts in this model:

> *Positive feedback in the form of staying committed, encouraging change, acknowledging successes, working with, seeing would-be desisters as "citizens" (not offenders), all emerge as components of assisted desistance…Formal change agents can help would-be desisters rebuild meaningful intra- and inter-personal ties thus contributing to bridge the gaps between 'offenders' and wider society (Villeneuve et al., 2021, p. 96).*

In practice, however, justice systems often operate in ways that impede, rather than promoting, desistance. As Porporino noted, justice systems are primarily geared towards the management of risk posed by offenders, rather than providing opportunities for thinking about desistance (Porporino, 2010). Further, programmes and interventions designed to support desistance are often experienced by offenders as not meeting or addressing their primary needs, leading to disengagement. Although Porporino was writing in the United States context, his comments also apply to much of contemporary Australian correctional practice, which likewise adopts the Risks-Needs-Responsivity framework (for comment, see Halsey, 2016; Henshaw et al., 2019).

Porporino went on to suggest that:

> *perhaps we may be more successful, offenders and our communities may be better served, if we get past our programme fetishism, casework managerialism, and our compliance-on-demand syndromes when working with offenders. The desistance paradigm suggests that we might be better off if we allowed offenders to guide us instead, listened to what they think might best fit their individual struggles out of crime, rather than continue to insist that our solutions are their salvation. Where we can help meaningfully is in working with offenders to clarify their goals and what they value in life, help them realise that there may be competing agendas and a real price to pay for change, focus on strategies that can work for them, refine and shape their*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *plans to get to where they want, and finally, and eventually, learn to get along without us. Perhaps corrections need not be reinvented, only reoriented towards sense and sensitivity that seriously allows and supports skilled staff to become truly skilled helpers (Porporino, 2010, p. 108).*

Shortly after this, McNeill et al. drew on desistance research to develop the following principles for criminal justice practice:

- be realistic about the complexity and difficulty of the process,
- individualise support for change,
- build and sustain hope,
- recognise and develop people's strengths,
- respect and foster agency (or self-determination),
- work with and through relationships (both personal and professional),
- develop social and human capital, and
- recognise and celebrate progress (McNeill et al., 2012).

Bottoms and Shapland discussed and endorsed these principles and added two more, namely:

- those seeking to support desistance should encourage would-be desisters to practise their new identities (e.g., father, worker), and
- the importance of developing trust, especially for when the desistance process experiences setbacks (Bottoms & Shapland, 2019).

2.3 Desistance within diverse communities

In 2009, Farrall described most desistance research as 'colour-blind'.(Farrall, 2009, p. 6) More recently, Farrall et al. reiterated that 'we still know very little about the processes by which individuals from minority ethnic and racialised groups stop offending' (Farrall et al., 2025, p. 279). Barr has also observed that most desistance research has neglected consideration of how gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other axes of identity shape desistance pathways (Barr, 2019).

However, more nuanced research is starting to emerge. Rodermond et al. reviewed 44 papers on desistance among women, to examine the applicability of male-based theories (Rodermond et al., 2016). They found that motherhood; supportive relationships with a partner, family and/or friends; and employment was important for women's desistance. Petrillo also examined desistance theories through a gendered lens and concluded that "[t]heories of how relationships support desistance present perhaps the most significant challenge to scholars seeking to understand women's desistance" (Rodermond et al., 2016, p. 65). She also found that women's replacement identities may be more constrained than men's, due to the interactions of narrative, identity, and agency and how these are 'navigated through a spectrum of gendered social and political institutions and practices' in patriarchal systems (Rodermond et al., 2016, p. 67). Finally, Petrillo applies a feminist lens to self-efficacy, noting that women's decisions around offending are often not a product of their own active decision-making and this dimension is further complicated by structural barriers, especially in relation to class and race .

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

Farrall et al.'s 2025 review on ethnicity and religion highlighted the importance of examining ethnicity in this context. As they noted,

> *criminal justice institutions in the West (and sometimes in post-colonial contexts) are inherently white spaces. They are constructed from, and viewed through, the legal, penal, carceral logics, mores and norms derived from majority white populations and imposed upon minoritised groups with little thought to the consequences…though those racialised as 'white' tend to avoid Black spaces, those racialised as 'Black' (or 'non-white') are forced to constantly navigate, and adapt to, white spaces—even when such adaptations and navigation can be deleterious (Farrall et al., 2025, pp. 279–280, citing Anderson, 2015; Workman & Liamputtong, 2024).*

Notwithstanding the limitations of the extant literature, Farrall et al. found that:

- the main correlates and associates of desistance are still generally relevant for diverse communities, but some (e.g., the role of religion or importance of employment) may be nuanced in some cases,
- the role of marriage may vary by ethnicity, because men with convictions are so common in certain communities that women may struggle to form relationships with men without convictions,
- there is significant variation in the levels of social capital enjoyed by communities, which can delay or change desistance processes in economically impoverished communities,
- the role of religion in processes of desistance may vary across communities and religions (e.g., attitudes towards deviancy, levels of religiosity),
- if engagement in crime is widespread in a community, as a result of structural barriers, would-be desisters may need to cut themselves off from those still involved crime, and
- because the criminal justice system tends to 'draw young men from disadvantaged communities and from particular ethnic backgrounds into its ambit, [this] may serve only to reinforce negative identities and, as such, to make desistance harder for some people' (2025: 291).

As evidence grows that socio-demographic factors influence desistance pathways, it is clear that more inclusive and purposive sampling approaches are needed, to better understand these issues. Fader and Traylor have called for

> *an intersectional perspective on desistance [that] would go beyond descriptive sex differences and examine how gender – as performed and enacted – can be understood to support or inhibit desistance….Another possible line of inquiry could drill down further to understand how race, class, age, and gender come together as a symbol of criminality and violence and what relationship this symbolism has for desistance (2015, p. 254).*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

2.3 Summary

In sum, desistance is best understood as a complex and dynamic process shaped by the interplay of age, social structures, personal agency, and identity. While behavioural change is central, sustaining desistance often requires shifts in self-narratives and opportunities to engage in prosocial roles, with generativity emerging as particularly important. At the same time, pathways out of crime are shaped by gender, class, ethnicity, and community context, underscoring the need for intersectional approaches that move beyond universal theories to account for the diverse realities of people seeking to "make good."

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

3. Methods

The POCS project involves analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected through two primary research methods: a survey and semi-structured interviews. To be eligible to participate in either the survey or interview, respondents had to be 18 years or older and have been found guilty or pleaded guilty to an offence in the ACT in the last five years. The nature of any sentence (e.g., whether they were sentenced to prison or a community-based order) was not a relevant eligibility criterion for the study. This ensured that individuals convicted of both serious and lower-level offences were eligible to participate in the study.

All research participants received $50, in recognition of their time and contribution.

3.1 Recruitment

This project used a targeted, non-random sampling approach. A random sample was not feasible, due to resourcing constraints and because the project's purpose was exploratory, rather than to generate population-level estimates. The focus was on reaching a wide cross-section of people who had had recent contact with the ACT criminal justice system and were willing to share their experiences. This approach is consistent with other desistance research conducted in Australia (Boxall, 2023; Halsey, 2016) and internationally (Maruna, 2001).

To maximise participation, the research team used a combination of recruitment strategies:

- *Social media:* The survey was advertised through the research team members' personal and institutional social media accounts (e.g., LinkedIn).
- *Community-based organisations:* Partner organisations — including the Aboriginal Legal Service, ACT Legal Aid, MensLink, OneLink, Prisoners Aid and Yeddung Mura — helped promote the project. They displayed flyers in their offices, circulated information through newsletters, and shared posts on their social media channels.
- *Government facilities:* With support from ACT Corrective Services and JACS, posters were displayed in community corrections offices and other relevant facilities. This ensured people currently engaged with justice services in community settings were also aware of the opportunity to participate.

Participants could register interest through a simple online webform, which asked for basic demographic information and allowed them to choose whether they wanted to complete a survey or participate in an interview. Those who opted for an interview could also nominate the type of interviewer they would feel most comfortable speaking with (i.e., male/female/non-binary, Indigenous/non-Indigenous). To protect participants' identity, all materials emphasised that participation was voluntary and confidential.

3.2 Survey

Participants had two options for completing the survey. First, they could complete the survey online. Alternatively, participants could contact a member of the research team, to administer the survey for them over the phone. This option was provided, so that participants with no access to the internet or limited literacy could complete the survey.

The survey tool, which was co-developed with international desistance scholars, lived experience researchers and local ACT services, asked participants to answer questions about their:

CABINET

CABINET

- sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender identity and Indigenous status),
- history of involvement in crime (nature of offending and recency of offending),
- current legal status (e.g., if they were the subject of current orders and/or being supervised by community corrections), and
- their level of motivation to stop offending, and the patterns of their offending over the past 12 months.

They were also be asked to identify the factors that they believed increased their motivation to stop offending and/or maintained this motivation (i.e., catalysts for change) and that made it harder for them to stop offending (i.e., barriers to change). Consistent with desistance theory, these questions focused on eliciting information for the following domains:

- *social/structural factors*: (e.g., employment, intimate relationships, having children, changing peer groups),
- *ontogenic factors* (e.g., cognitive maturation),
- *health and wellbeing (e.g., mental health, alcohol and drug use),*
- *agentic/cognitive factors* (e.g., increased level of frustration, dissatisfaction with offending and its impacts on their lives),
- *relational/community factors:* (e.g., desire to become a better member of the community, to support family members and children), and
- *contact with support services and justice systems* (e.g., counselling, arrest, prison, restorative justice conferencing).

Most of the questions in the survey were closed-ended, but there were also opportunities for participants to elaborate with free-text responses throughout.

3.2.1 Validating survey responses

Given the online administration of the survey and the potential vulnerability of open community-facing surveys to fraudulent or low-quality responses (Dewitt et al., 2018), a comprehensive validation strategy was implemented. Validation occurred at three levels: software-based screening, survey design, and researcher oversight (Dewitt et al., 2018; Giles et al., 2025).

Software-based screening

Several features within the Qualtrics platform were activated, to flag or block potentially invalid responses. First, internet protocol (IP) address restrictions ensured that respondents were located within Australia, although this method was recognised as imperfect, given the use of virtual private networks (VPNs). IP prefixes associated with known VPN services were selectively blocked, to reduce the risk of non-genuine participation, taking caution to avoid excluding legitimate respondents. A reCAPTCHA score was also recorded for each respondent, with low scores automatically flagged for review. In addition, Qualtrics was set to prevent multiple submissions from the same IP address. Finally, metadata were used to identify suspicious activity, including extremely short completion times, unusual times of day, or clusters of responses received within a very short timeframe ('survey bombing'). When survey bombing was detected, the survey link was closed and relaunched with a new website link and Quick Response (QR) code.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Survey design

A number of validation questions were also embedded within the survey itself, to identify inconsistent or implausible responses. For example, respondents were asked about Indigenous status and engagement with Indigenous-specific services; incongruent responses provided a check on data validity. The inclusion of free-text items also enabled the research team to assess whether responses were coherent and plausible. The survey was piloted extensively, to establish an expected completion time, against which unusually fast responses could be benchmarked.

Researcher oversight

All survey data were manually reviewed, to detect patterns suggesting fraudulent responses (e.g., nonsensical free-text entries, inconsistent sociodemographic details, repetitive answer patterns). Responses that raised concern were excluded. In addition, the research team monitored overall response trends; sharp, atypical spikes in completions were investigated, as indicators of fraudulent activity.

3.2.2 Survey analysis

The survey data was analysed in two stages. First, participants' experiences were described at an aggregate level (i.e., overall) and then at a bi-variate level, using chi-square tests of association. The bi-variate analyses focused on describing variations in desistance journeys across the community, disaggregating the sample by gender (female, male, trans/non-binary), Indigeneity and desistance stage.

3.2.3 Survey sample

Table 1 sets out the sociodemographic characteristics of the survey participants. In total, 112 participants completed the survey. Over half of the sample were cis male (n = 60, 56%), 37% were cis female (n = 37) and 7% were trans or non-binary (n = 8). Approximately half of participants were aged between 18 and 34 and none were 55 years or older. Most participants identified as heterosexual (81%, n = 87), with 19% identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or other (LGB+; n = 21).

Half of the sample identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 37% were Aboriginal (n = 41), 10% were Torres Strait Islander (n = 11) and 3% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (n = 3). The overwhelming majority of the sample were born in Australia (95%, n = 98), and only two participants (2%) spoke a language other than English most of the time at home.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of survey participants (*n*; %)

		n	%
Gender identity[a]	Cisgender male	60	56
	Cisgender female	40	37
	Trans or non-binary	8	7
Age (years)[b]	18-24	9	8
	25-34	49	45
	35-44	40	36
	45-54	12	11
	55-64	0	0
	65+	0	0
Indigenous status[b]	Aboriginal	41	37
	Torres Strait Islander	11	10
	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	3	3
	Non-Indigenous	55	48
	Would prefer not to say/Don't know	4	3
Sexual orientation[a]	Heterosexual	87	81
	LGB+	21	19
Highest level of education completed[a]	Year 9 or below	21	19
	Year 10	19	18
	Year 11	11	10
	Year 12	22	20
	Vocational qualification	23	21
	Undergraduate	9	8
	Postgraduate degree	3	3
Country of birth[c]	Australia	98	95
	Country other than Australia – Mainly English speaking	0	0
	Country other than Australia – Mainly non-English speaking	5	5
Language spoken most of the time at home[b]	English	108	98
	Language other than English	2	2
Health status[d]	Living with a disability	29	26
	Not living with a disability	81	74
Employment statuse	Employed	50	60
	Unemployed	33	40

Note: Percentage totals may not equal 100 due to rounding.

a: Information missing for 4 participants

b: Information missing for 2 participants

c: Information missing for 9 participants

d: Disability defined as someone having a health condition that has lasted (or is expected to last) longer than six months and impacts ability to do day-to-day activities. Information missing for 2 participants.

e: Information missing for 29 participants

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

3.3 Semi-structured interviews

In addition to the survey, we conducted semi-structured interviews with people who have had contact with the ACT criminal justice system. One of the primary purposes of the interviews was to provide participants with the opportunity to describe their desistance (or persistence)

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

journeys in their own words, which in turn allowed us to identify and explore new emergent themes that were not identified through the survey. The interviews also allowed participants to discuss the relative importance of different factors and their cumulative impact on their desistance/persistence journeys and the relative importance of different factors in a more nuanced and detailed way than is possible through the use of a survey. Finally, by providing participants with a space to tell their stories, we were able to identify not only the role of different factors that influence desistance pathways, but also explore the *narratives* that participants use to explain their desistance or persistence.

Interviews were conducted loosely in accordance with an interview schedule developed by the research team. However, the questions were purposefully very open-ended, to encourage respondents to present their narratives in their own words. Interviews were conducted in person or over the phone.

Interviews took between 28 and 90 minutes to complete, and were then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Transcripts were analysed thematically, to identify consistent patterns and outliers that could be observed across the sample.

3.3.1 Interview sample

We conducted 16 one-on-one interviews and one focus group with 11 participants. The focus group was comprised of Indigenous community members (n = 8), respected community members and family members (n = 3) who were engaged with an Indigenous community-based service located in the ACT.

Overall, 63% of the sample were male (n = 10), 38% were female (n = 6) and none were trans or non-binary. Approximately 79% of participants were between the ages of 25-44 (n = 11), 14% were 45-54 years old. Half (56%, n = 9) were Aboriginal (none were Torres Strait Islander). Only two participants were born in a country other than Australia, one of whom spoke a language other than English most of the time at home (see Table 2). A third of participants had very low levels of education, having only completed Year 9 or below (33%, n = 4), and two thirds were unemployed (69%, n = 11).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Table 2: Sociodemographic characteristics of interview and focus group participants

		n	%
Gender identity	Male	10	63
	Female	6	38
	Non-binary/Trans	0	0
Age (years)[a]	18-24	1	7
	25-34	5	36
	35-44	6	43
	45-54	2	14
	55-64	0	0
	65+	0	0
Indigenous status	Aboriginal	9	56
	Torres Strait Islander	0	0
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	0	0
	Non-Indigenous	7	44
	Prefer not to say	0	0
Country of birth	Australia	14	88
	Country other than Australia	2	13
Language spoken most of the time at home	English	16	100
	Language other than English	0	0
Highest level of education completed[b]	Year 9 or below	4	33
	Year 10	0	0
	Year 11	2	17
	Year 12	0	0
	Vocational qualification	4	33
	Undergraduate	2	17
Employment status	Employed	5	31
	Unemployed	11	69

Note: The sample is limited to those participants who had contact with the ACT criminal justice system in the past five years. As such, it does not include the details of family members and Indigenous Elders and respected community members who participated in the focus group.

a: Information missing for 2 participants

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

3.4 Ethics

All recruitment processes, data collection tools, and study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No: H/2024/0628). The research design, including the survey and interview tools, was developed in close collaboration with community partners and experts to ensure accessibility, cultural safety, and relevance.

These collaborations were integral to the project's success, grounding the study in community knowledge, lived experience, and professional expertise, and ensuring that participants' voices could be heard in a safe and respectful way.

3.5 Defining desistance stage

In regard to the survey, desistance 'stage' was measured through the analysis of participant answers to three sets of questions:

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

- *Motivation to desist:* Participants were asked to identify which statement was closest to describing them, at time of completing the survey:
  - "I have stopped offending" (highest level of motivation)
  - "I have made a definite decision to try and stop offending'
  - "I would like to stop offending but do not know if I can"
  - "I don't think I will ever stop offending" (lowest level of motivation).
- *Frequency of offending in past five years:* Participants were also asked whether their offending had changed in frequency over the past five years (gone down a lot, gone down a bit, stayed about the same, gone up a bit, gone up a lot).
- *Recency of offending:* Participants were asked about the recency of their offending across a range of offence types (i.e., less than 12 months ago, 1-5 years ago, more than 5 years ago)

answers to these three questions were combined, to create three survey participant groups: *stable* desisters, *emerging* desisters and *persisters*. The description of each is of these is set out in Table 3. However, it is important to note that no participants agreed with the statement "I don't think I will ever stop offending". This suggests that all of the survey participants were somewhat motivated to stop offending.

Overall, 26% (n = 29) were stable desisters, 27% were emerging desisters (n = 30), and almost half (46%, n = 51) were persisters. This information was missing for two participants.

Table 3: Description of survey participant groups

Cohort	Description	Prevalence
Stable desisters	"Stopped offending" and had not offended in the past 12 months.	26%
Emerging desisters	"Stopped offending", but had offended in the past 12 months. Lower levels of motivation to stop offending, offending has gone down a lot, and had not offended in the last 12 months.	27%
Persisters	Lower levels of motivation, offending has gone down or stayed the same, have offended in the past 12 months. Made a decision to stop offending: • and offending has gone down, but had offended in the past 12 months. • but offending has stayed about the same or gone up.	46%

CABINET

Table 4: Description of survey participant groups

		Stable desisters	Emerging desisters	Persisters
Motivation	I have stopped offending	100	70	0
	I have made a definite decision to try and stop offending	0	27	82
	I would like to stop offending but I'm not sure if I can	0	3	18
Trend	Gone down a lot	100	100	12
	Gone down a bit	0	0	39
	Stayed about the same	0	0	25
	Gone up by a lot	0	0	12
	Gone up a bit	0	0	12
Recency	Last 12 months	0	70	66
	1-5 years ago	88	30	30
	More than 5 years ago	12	0	4

Note: Information missing for 2 participants

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

4. Catalysts for and barriers to change

In this section, we identify and describe the catalysts for and barriers to change identified by research participants. These are grouped into several key domains:

- cognitive shifts,
- maturation,
- relationships,
- external factors,
- criminal justice system sanctions,
- health and wellbeing, and
- service engagement.

Catalysts and barriers were identified based on participants self-identifying that specific factors either supported their desistance journeys (by increasing their motivation and/or maintaining desistance) or acted as a barrier.

4.1 Cognitive shifts

A significant proportion of participants said that their motivation to stop offending was attributable in part to a change in how they viewed themselves and their offending. These cognitive shifts took three main forms:

- believing they had the ability to change (self-efficacy),
- imagining a feared self (i.e., a future them who has not stopped offending), and
- imagining alternative futures (i.e., a future them who has stopped offending).

4.1.1 Self-efficacy – the ability to change

Perceptions of agency and control – referred to here as *self-efficacy* – were critical to participants' perceived ability to stop offending. Over half of the survey participants (59%, *n* = 66) said that their motivation to stop offending was a catalyst for change because they 'believed I could stop'.

However, it is also important to note that, for 47% of participants, low self-efficacy was a barrier to change (Figure 1):

- 30% (*n* = 33) felt like they had no other choice, other than offending,
- 19% (*n* = 21) did not know how to stop offending,
- 19% (*n* = 21) felt they had no control over their actions, and
- 12% (*n* = 13) said 'committing crimes just happens to me'.

A small number of participants struggled to explain their offending and described it as attributable to their inability to regulate their emotions and deal with their anger in constructive ways.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

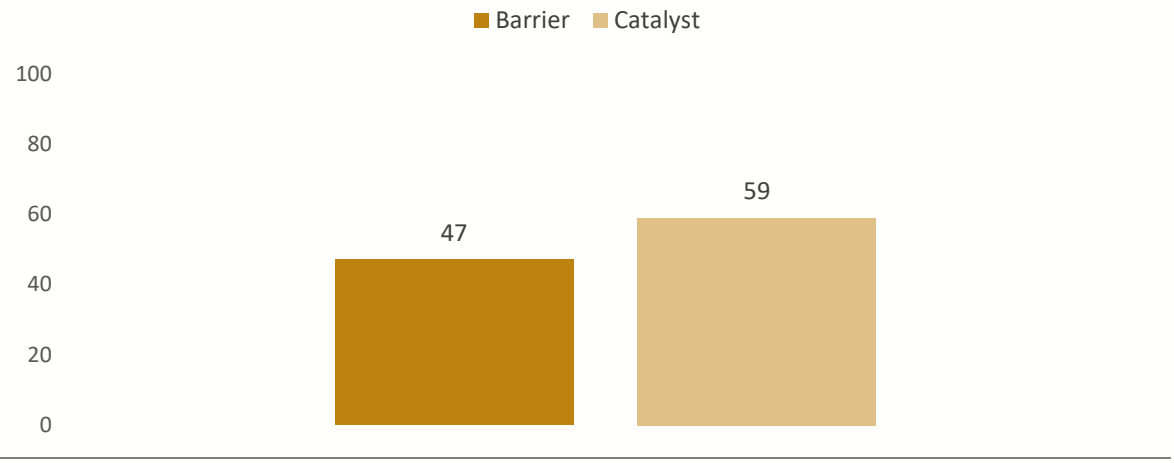
CABINET

My temper is a bit explosive and I can't control it (Female, 25-34 yrs, Aboriginal)

People make me angry and I can't help myself but to fight when provoked (Female, 45-54 yrs old, non-Indigenous)

I found it hard to manage my anger until I went and seeked professional support (Male, 25-34 yrs, non-Indigenous)

Figure 1: Proportion of survey participants who identified self-efficacy as a catalyst and/or barrier for change (%)



Note: Total does not equal 100 because categories were not mutually exclusive (i.e., someone could view self-efficacy as a barrier and catalyst for change)

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice system project, 2025 [Computer file]

4.1.2 Feared selves – what people want to avoid

Over half of the participants (54%, *n* = 60) said that they wanted to stop offending because they 'didn't like who they were becoming' and/or had looked to the future, if they kept on offending and it 'scared me' (45%, *n* = 50). These findings point to the role of the *feared self* — a negative identity linked to their offending, which people were motivated to avoid. The following comments illustrate this further.

I had lost too much already. I could see the path I was taking can only led to lose (Male, 35-44 yrs, non-Indigenous).

A mate died. That really shook me and made me rethink everything (Female, 45-54 yrs, Torres Strait Islander).

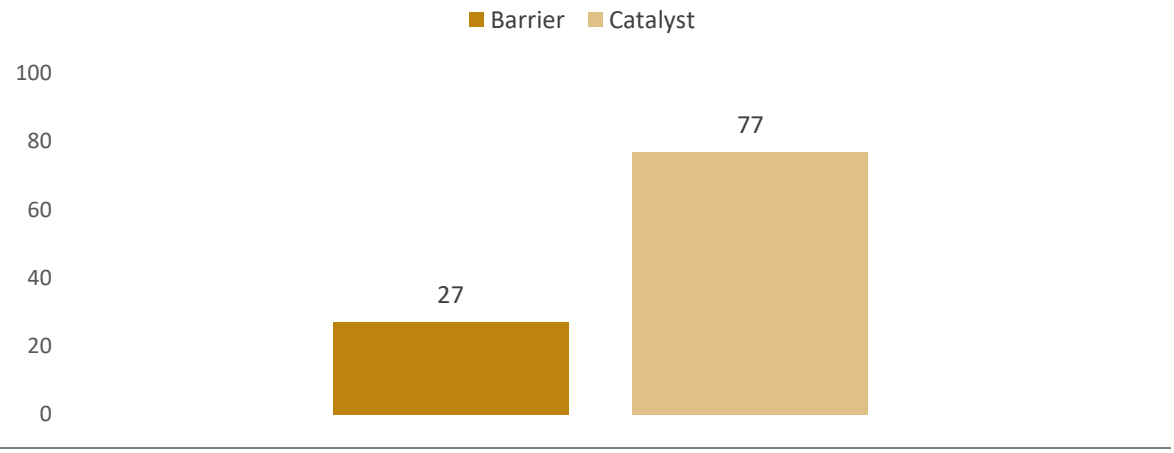
As set out in Figure 2, the evocation of a feared self was a catalyst for change for 77% (*n* = 85) of participants. However for others, the emotional rewards of offending created a competing pull (i.e., the inability to evoke a feared self), making change more difficult (27%, *n* = 30). Importantly, these rewards were not financial but emotional and identity-based:

- 11% (*n* = 12) said that crime made them feel good about themselves,

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

- 20% (*n* = 22) said that it gave them a rush, and
- 8% (*n* = 9) said it was important for their identity.

Figure 2: Proportion of survey participants who said feared selves was a catalyst for change, and/or the emotional rewards of offending was a barrier for change (%)



Note: Total does not equal 100 because categories were not mutually exclusive

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice system project, 2025 [Computer file]

Another noted benefit of offending was the alleviation of boredom. Several interview participants said that, although they were motivated to stop offending, they were more likely to offend when they had nothing else to do with their time. This is demonstrated in the following quote from Maia, who relapsed into drug use and offending, during a four-week period of relative social isolation, when she did not have anything to do. Although Maia framed this relapse as being triggered by boredom, it also appeared to be a way for her to deal with the negative emotions related to her social isolation during the holiday period and the stress of family law proceedings and was exacerbated by her infrequent check-ins with ACTCS.

> *I get to Christmas time, I've been sober for six months, I don't have the kids for two weeks, I don't have work for two weeks, I'm absolutely run down...For me that was a – great, treat yourself. You can disassociate from all of this for a minute. That was it. I thought it would be a one weekend thing. That was straight back into addiction for me, over that period (Maia, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous female)*

Importantly, Maia was incarcerated again and, when she was bailed, she knew she was likely to relapse without additional support. So, she reached out to Toora, a support organisation for women, which she said helped her through this period of high risk for relapse and recidivism.

4.1.3 Alternative selves – what people hope for

One third of participants (33%, *n* = 37) said that they could see a future where they were not offending and wanted to achieve it. This is consistent with the concept of *alternative selves* – non-offending identities to which participants could aspire to achieve.

The qualitative survey data and interviews provided numerous examples of alternative selves that participants were working towards. For some, this meant reclaiming valued roles, such as

CABINET

CABINET

parent, community member or respected individual. For example, Tina said 'I want to be a mother, not a criminal'. As the quotes below demonstrate, for some, this simply meant living a better life that was consistent with their own values:

> *I didn't want to see myself as opposed to what I actually am (Male, 25-34 yrs, non-Indigenous)*
>
> *I wanted to make myself happier (Male, 25-34 yrs, non-Indigenous)*
>
> *I want to have a bright future and im still young (Non-binary, 25-34 yrs, non-Indigenous).*
>
> *Just wanting a better lifestyle for myself having money when I needed it a job a roof and what is known as normality (Male, 25-34 yrs, non-Indigenous)*

Others described wanting to return to the 'old life' they had, before justice system involvement. This appeared to be limited to those participants who had not been system-involved for most of their lives and so knew what this old life looked like. Maia observed that, although she was able to do this for herself, an alternative life may be confronting or difficult to imagine, for people who had been involved in the system for longer periods of time.

> *I know what life before this was like for me. So, I knew what I was working towards. Whereas, I can imagine that, if someone who's been in addiction or this lifestyle since teenage years, they probably wouldn't – that concept is too scary. Like, it's very lonely. It's a very – you can't even fathom, you can't even go: 'it's going to be okay, mate, you're getting rid of your old life to start a new life', all this cliché shit, they're going to go, 'well…' (Maia, 25-34 years old, non-Indigenous female).*

Maia's observation was supported by other interviewees, who had been involved in the justice system for extended periods of time. Role models and lived experience practitioners (i.e., practitioners who had prior contact with the justice system) were often critical in helping these people imagine alternative futures. Frank, for example, explained that he was only able to engage with treatment, when he connected with a therapist, who had lived through similar trauma.

> *The therapist, mate, he's been through everything that I've been through and that's what helped me to connect with him…. And that's the one thing that I've found in the justice system, a lot of the help that's available within the justice system, they don't understand, they don't know, they've never been through it (Frank, 35-44 years old, non-Indigenous male).*

Laura similarly recounted an experience where, during in-patient drug treatment, she had attended an event with former clients of the service that had recovered. She found this event transformational and it inspired her to continue in her recovery. As she described, meeting and seeing 'success stories' (i.e., people who had desisted) was a powerful way of communicating that an alternative way of living.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

> *You never see the success stories, ever. You're just in court, and there's a whole lot of criminals around you, and drug users, and that's, like, where's the good news story? There's no encouragement to change...if they had lived experience people roaming around talking to people perhaps... that's something that I wanna do...Because people don't know that there's another way, they really don't. I didn't, for a long time (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*

The importance of having an alternative future to work towards was discussed during the focus group, which participants described as 'goals' they wanted to achieve. This was one of the benefits they got through participating in services like Yeddung Mura, which worked with them to identify goals they wanted to achieve.

> *Cameron: If you've got nothing that you want to achieve, then you end up just getting stuck in the same rut that you're always doing.*
>
> *Matty: Something to aim for.*
>
> *Steven: So you're [not] getting in trouble and shit.*
>
> *Matty: Yeah.*
>
> *Interviewer: Yeah, so that kind of forward-thinking sort of stuff?*
>
> *Cameron: Yeah, yeah. Moving forward, moving in the right direction.*

Key finding

Motivation to desist often came from how participants saw themselves. Some imagined *alternative selves* they wanted to become, while others who were still offending looked into the future and wanted to avoid the *feared self* they saw. However, all were influenced – whether positively or negatively – by their sense of *self-efficacy*. Services that help people believe in their ability to change, and show them credible role models, are critical to sustaining these shifts.

4.1.4 Summary

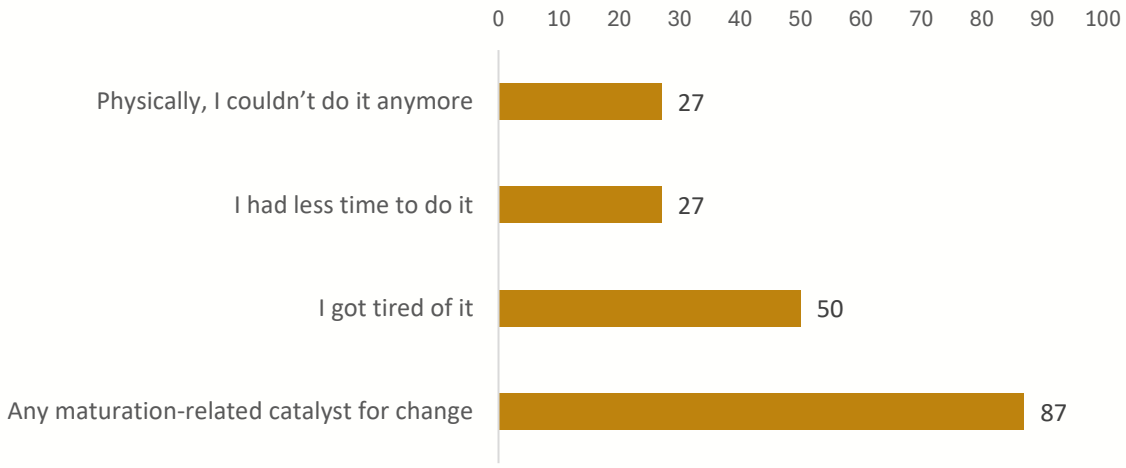
Cognitive shifts were central to participants' motivation to stop offending. Many described increased self-efficacy — the belief that they could change — as a key driver of desistance, though a significant minority struggled with low agency and self-control. Others were motivated by a desire to avoid a 'feared self' shaped by ongoing offending, while a smaller group were pulled by aspirations for 'alternative selves', such as being a good parent or living a more stable life. At the same time, the emotional rewards of crime and the difficulty of imagining different futures created powerful counterforces. Overall, desistance was shaped not only by the presence of motivating cognitive shifts, but also by how strongly they were challenged by competing identities and contexts.

CABINET

4.2 Maturation

Overall, 87% of survey participants (*n* = 97) said that maturation processes were a catalyst for change. The most common reason was that they were 'tired' of offending (50%, *n* = 55), while 27% said that they physically could not do it anymore (or had less time to do it (*n* = 30) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Proportion of survey participants who identified maturation as a catalyst for change (%)



Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Each of these reasons measure different aspects of the maturation process. Getting 'tired' of offending could be indicative of emotional maturation processes, whereby someone simply ages out of crime and no longer sees the benefits associated with it. This is consistent with the age-crime curve, which has found that offending risk peaks in middle-to-late adolescence and then declines rapidly (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). Meanwhile, physical incapacity relates to the ageing process, whereby people may not be able to participate in certain forms of offending, as they have done previously (e.g, running away from a crime scene).

Finally, having less time could be related to acquiring new social roles, such as getting married or having children, so the opportunities to engage in opportunistic offending may become more limited (Warr, 1998). This is supported by additional analysis of the data: 35% of participants who had children (*n* = 25) identified this as a catalyst for change, compared to 13% (*n* = 5) of participants who did not have children.

The interviews provided further support for the role of maturation in the desistance process. Several participants referred to getting to a point in their lives where they felt 'ready' to stop offending and to engage with supports that would help them to reach this goal. Although the participants struggled to explain why they were ready now, rather than previously, there was a general sense that they simply were ready and were tired of offending and dealing with the consequences of their offending.

> *I was kind of sick and tired of being sick and tired, sick of getting up and going who have I got to rob today, what have I got to do to make money (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *I don't know. I'm getting old now, I'm over it. No, I mean, start doing the right thing for myself, and for my kids as well. Because they're, like, suffering (Tina, 25-34 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *I still use buy and sell drugs but I'm not robbing and assaulting people anymore. So I'm still doing stuff just not hectic stuff and not driving stolen cars anymore. Just settled more sick of going to jail (Female Torres Strait Islander, 25-34 years old).*

Although difficult to articulate and put into words, many of the participants were clear that, if they had not been ready to change, then they likely would not have been able to engage as meaningfully in the services as they did and maintain their change. This is consistent with the TTM (see 2.1.1) and highlights the importance of understanding the readiness of people involved in the justice system to change as a factor that will likely influence their service engagement and in turn behaviour change.

For James, maturation involved taking responsibility for his offending, and trying to move forward. He compared himself to other people he was incarcerated with, who he described as being unlikely to stop offending because they didn't take responsibility for their offending. instead blaming others:

> *They've got every single personality you can meet in gaol, and all of them have the same thing. Someone else's fault. It's not my fault. This happened to me, this is why. And they all come back a second or third or fourth time, and none of the people I spoke to were ever someone who's only brought in once. And I go: what is different to what I'm hearing from them to what I need to say. And it's who's taking responsibility. And if you take responsibility for everything that's happened in your life, that's what it is. And it makes the healing process and the growing process just that much better (James, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Key finding

Participants often linked their desistance to a sense of 'readiness'. Feeling tired of offending, physically unable to continue or occupied with new social roles all shaped whether they felt they could engage with services and sustain change.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

4.3 Relationships

Relationships emerged as an important catalyst for change. This included relationships with children, family members, friends, and intimate partners

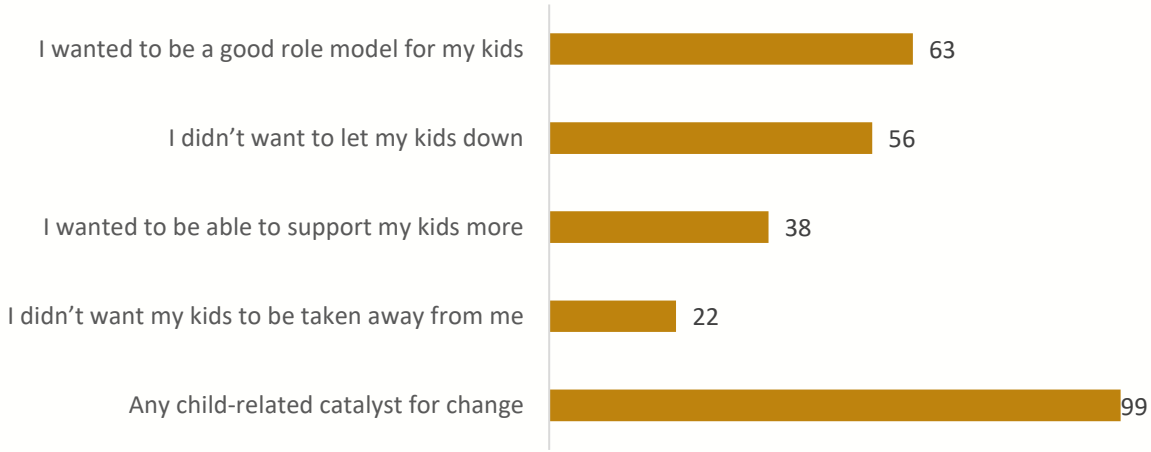
4.3.1 Children

Among survey participants who said that they had children (*n* = 72), all except one (99%) identified their children as being a catalyst for change. The most commonly identified motivations were:

- wanting to be a good role model for their children (63%, *n* = 45),
- fear of letting their children down (56%, *n* = 40), and
- wanting to be able to support their children (38%, *n* = 27).

Fear about having their children taken away from them was also mentioned, although this was the least commonly identified motivating factor (22%, *n* = 16; Figure 4).

Figure 4: Proportion of survey participants who identified children as a catalyst for change (%)



Note: Sample limited to survey participants who had children (*n* = 72)

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

The important role of children was also highlighted in the interviews and qualitative survey responses, with participants describing their desire to be there to support their kids, not let them down, and not be a source of trauma or hardship in their children's lives.

> *None besides wanting to see my kids again because offending has jeopardized that for me (Female, 18-24 yrs, Aboriginal)*
>
> *Kids changed everything for me. Once I had kids, that was it…I stayed out of jail while I had all five of them, you know, and yeah, this time it's really, really affected me, so yeah…I had a little slip up …And bang, and then just the disappointment, you know? You feel as though you let them down, so never want to do that again (Matty, age unknown, Indigenous male).*

CABINET

> *I'm going to get my boy, and I'm doing it for him, like… I'm the only bloke he's got, really, like fucking, his mum doesn't seem too interested in doing the right thing by him…I need to fucking pull my finger out, because the dude deserves better (Liam, 24-35 years old, non-Indigenous male).*

Liam further described his desire to be a better parent than he had growing up, so that his son could avoid falling into the cycle of offending and incarceration that had characterised his own, and his father's life:

> *I don't want to pass this shit down the line. My dad's a fuck-up, I'm a fuck-up, my little brother's a fuck-up….Like, you know, my cousin's a fuck-up. My whole family….[but] my grandparents are fucking fantastic… My older brother's …he's doing all right, no drugs either, just, you know, on the grind. Good lad….So, what the fuck happened to us, Dad? So I don't want to do that, I don't want to be that deadbeat dad that passes fucking this kind of damage down the line (Liam, 25-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Some older survey and interview participants were motivated to stop offending so they could have a role in their grandchildren's lives, particularly if they had been absent from their own children's lives.

> *My granddaughter died while I was in jail last and I never got to meet her I don't want to miss out Grandkids lives (Female, 45-54 yrs, Indigenous status unknown).*
>
> *But my other daughter, my eldest, who has two, the grandchildren, as well, she won't talk to me. But time will tell. And I'll just keep trying, and just keep being present, stay in recovery (Laura, 45-54 years old, Indigenous female).*

That children were viewed as a powerful catalyst for change among parents is supported by broader desistance research (Barr, 2019; Boonstoppel, 2019a; Healy & O'Donnell, 2008). However, while this research has suggested that relationships with children is more important for women than men (Abell, 2018), this was not borne out by the current data; both men and women identified children as a catalyst for change. The above quotes provide some insights into why children may support desistance journeys, including a restructuring of priorities (i.e., I have to do better so I can be there for my kids; it's not about me anymore), as well as wanting to access the relational goods that may be emergent from these relationships (i.e., I love my kids and I want them to love me). However, caring for children is also a form of generativity, as it involves the investment of energy and time into the next generation, in this case their children. This provides opportunities for offending parents involved in the justice system to 'make good', by repairing the harms their offending has caused their children, and form pro-social and positive identities separate from their offending.

Some interview participants reflected that losing their children was a trigger for relapse into drug and alcohol use and offending. This was described by participants as attributable to the grief and anger associated with the loss of this relationship, and having a 'nothing to lose' mentality.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

> *When I turned 18, I started behaving myself, thought I was a dad for a bit. Turns out I wasn't. That's when I really fucking – yeah, I started drinking and fighting everyone, because I was angry at the world. Six years of raising a little girl, to find out she wasn't mine (Liam, 24-35 years old, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *Once I lost the kids. Like, I'd fought for them through Family Court and all that kind of stuff, and yeah, there was no orders, and it was, like, they could see that I was good with the kids, all that kind of stuff, but then I changed, as soon as I've moved in with that dealer. But once I lost them, and they didn't want to come see me anymore, and that's completely, like, you know, that's on me. Yeah, once that happened, I just was, like, no. And I really smashed myself after that (Laura, 45-54 years old, Indigenous female).*

Key finding

Children were a powerful catalyst for change. Most parents in the study said they wanted to be good role models, avoid letting their children down, and provide support. At the same time, loss of access to children could have the opposite effect — triggering grief, anger, and relapse into offending.

4.3.2 Family members

Most survey participants identified wanting to be more connected to and supportive of family members as catalysts for change. The most common catalyst was not wanting to let their family down (61%, *n* = 68), followed by wanting to be able to support family more (49%, *n* = 49) and then concern about losing their family, if they continued offending (41%, *n* = 46).

The desire to be able to form new, or repair existing, relationships with family members was also described by interview participants as an important catalyst for change. During the focus group, Bill said proudly that he had not been incarcerated for at least six months, which was a significant change in his offending patterns. When asked what motivated him, he said 'Family is number one. Family. Family is number one'. Further, Dylan said that his primary motivation for avoiding reoffending when he had been released from the AMC was rebuilding his family:

> *I accepted what I did, I took that time, and I did it well, and now I'm doing everything right by them and by myself to make myself a better human, not for the community but for my family and my future self (Dylan, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Survey participants were also asked about the extent to which different people in their lives were helping them to try and stop offending. As shown in Figure 5, over half of participants said that a parent had tried to help them stop offending (mothers = 75%, *n* = 81; fathers: 56%, *n* = 60), 43% (*n* = 46) had siblings who were supporting them, and 15% had other family members (*n* = 16, e.g., aunts, uncles, and grandparents).

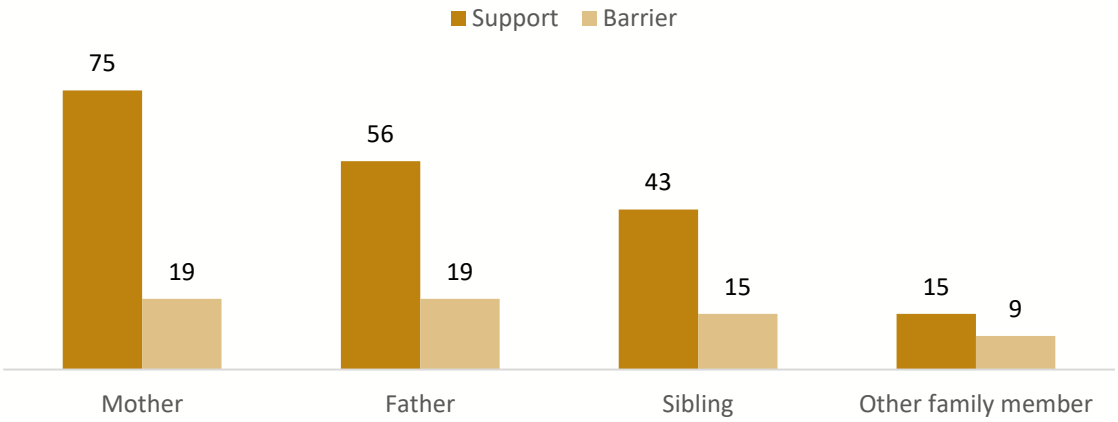
CABINET

CABINET

This demonstrates that most participants (91%, *n* = 98) had family members who were actively trying to support them, with 62% (*n* = 67) saying they had two or more relatives offering support.

At the same time, a significant proportion of survey participants also identified family members as barriers to desistance. In fact, 19% of participants (*n* = 18) said that their mother or father had made it harder for them to stop. Meanwhile, 15% (*n* = 16) reported this in relation to their siblings and 9% (*n* = 9) said the same for other family members (see Figure 5). However, only 5% (*n* = 5) of participants said that their family members made it feel like they had to offend, meaning that there is likely another mechanism to explain why family members were experienced as barriers to change.

Figure 5: Family members as facilitators or barriers to desistance, by family member type (%)



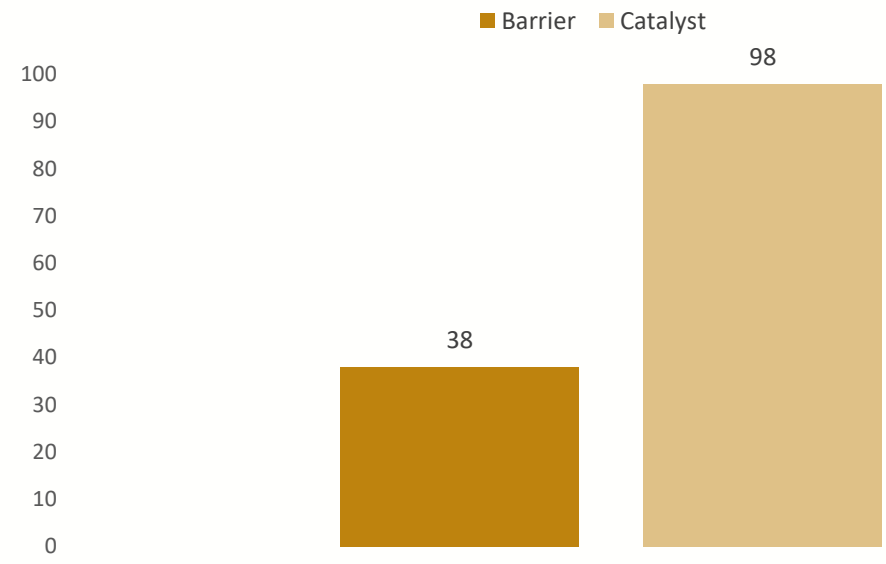
Note: Information missing for 4 participants

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Figure 6: Proportion of survey participants who identified family as a catalyst and/or barrier for change (%)



Note: Total does not equal 100 because categories were not mutually exclusive

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Some insights are provided by the interviews, where familial offending was raised as a barrier to desistance. For example, Tina who had had significant involvement with the justice system from a young age and had been incarcerated for most of her adult life, said that all of her immediate family — parents and siblings — were involved in the justice system. Although she wanted to stop offending, she said she did not know what this looked like, in the absence of alternative role models in her life.

Meanwhile, Liam said that when he was incarcerated, he had been put into the same cell as his younger brother which was disastrous for both of them: 'Fight Night 2000 every bloody night, come out of these black and blue. Used to punch the shit out of each other'. Liam's younger brother, other siblings and father had been incarcerated throughout their adult lives, and he said desistance involved trying not to be like them.

> *He's my little brother. And he's untrustworthy, and he's lost…he spent most of his adult life in gaol. So he'd be 32. He's done about 17 years. Yeah. There's no helping him.*

The experiences of Tina, Liam and others is supported by further analysis of the survey data, which demonstrated that family histories of offending were common among participants:

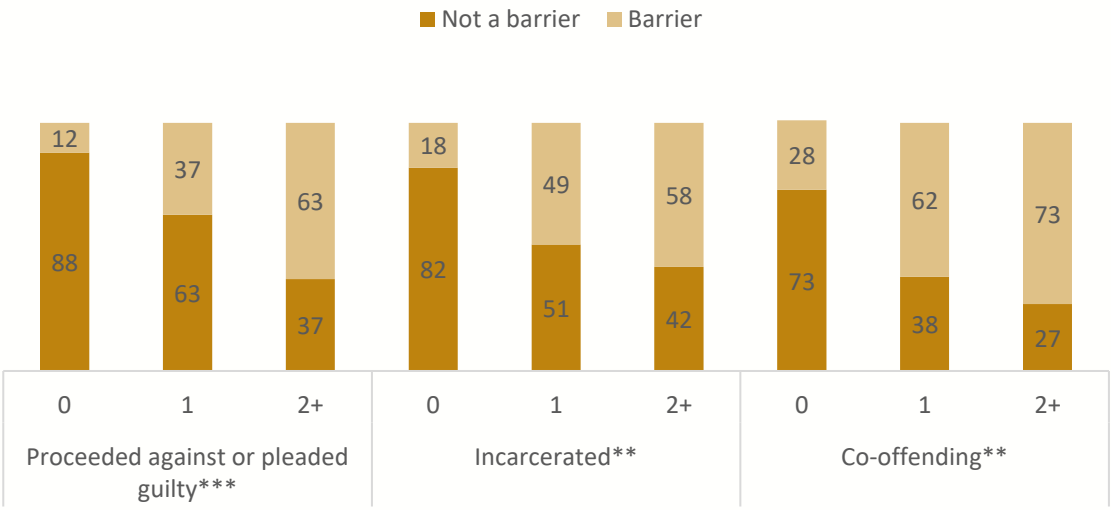
- *Offending:* Almost two-thirds (64%, *n* = 65) said that at least one of their family members had been proceeded against or pleaded guilty to an offence, with 21% (*n* = 24) saying this applied to two or more family members.
- *Incarceration:* 84% (*n* = 67) said that at least one family member had been incarcerated previously, with 33% (*n* = 26) saying multiple family members had been incarcerated.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

- *Co-offending:* A substantial minority (29%, *n* = 32) reported that they had previously offended with a family member, with 10% (*n* = 11) saying they had co-offended with multiple family members.

Participants who co-offended with multiple family members (Fischer's exact = 0.001), had multiple family members who had been proceeded against ($X^2(2) = 19.52$, $p < 0.001$) and/or incarcerated ($X^2(2) = 14.05$, $p < 0.01$), were more likely to say their family was a barrier to desistance (see Figure 7). This suggests that even if family members were not making participants feel like they had to offend through overt pressure, having contact with multiple family members who were also in contact with the justice system created unique barriers to desistance. This is supported by research which has found that parental involvement in offending is a strong risk factor for their offspring's involvement as well (Besemer et al., 2017).

Figure 7: Proportion of survey participants who said their family members made it harder for them to stop offending, by familial offending (%)



*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

However, it is important to understand that family members' roles as facilitators and barriers to desistance are not constant or stable over time. For example, a small cohort of participants identified that family members who they had co-offended with previously were also trying to support them to stop offending. This was particularly notable for those who said they had co-offended with their mothers; although the number of participants in this category was relatively small, most (78%; *n* = 7) also identified their mother as trying to help them to stop offending. This suggests that, when considering the factors that support desistance, some family members can simultaneously be a source for support and yet also provide opportunities for offending to continue.

Key finding

Family members were a major influence on participants' desistance journeys. Most provided encouragement, practical help, and role models for change. At the same time, family involvement in offending — particularly co-offending — could make it harder to stop. The

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

same relatives could be both barriers and supports, underscoring the complex and dynamic role of family in desistance.

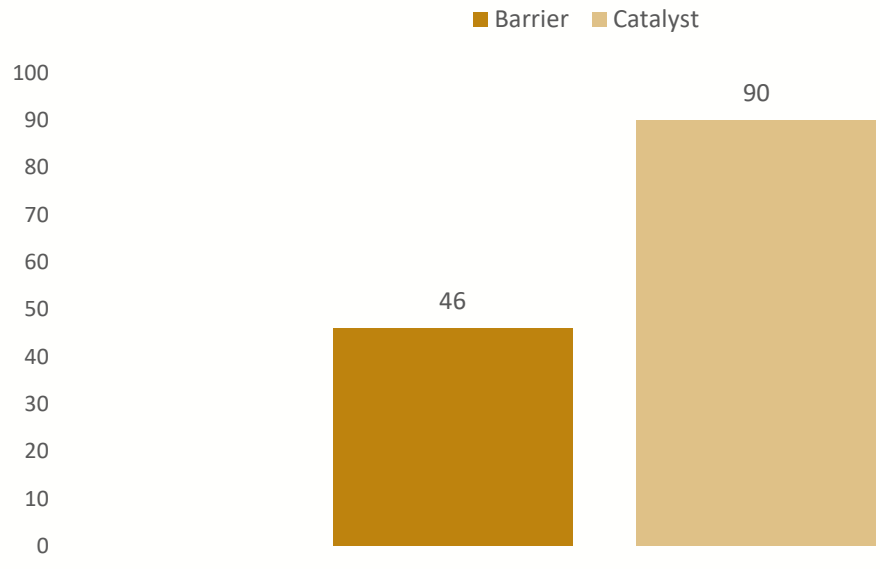
4.3.3 Friends

For most participants (90%, *n* = 100), friendships were a catalyst for positive change, with almost half (46%, *n* = 51) saying they had made new friends who were not involved in offending. A smaller proportion said they did not want to let their friends down (18%, *n* = 20) and/or were encouraged when their friends stopped offending (15%, *n* = 17).

At the same time, 46% (*n* = 51) of participants identified friendships as barriers to change. In addition, over half (56%; *n* = 62) said their desistance required cutting off friends, who made it harder for them to stop (this is commonly described in the desistance literature as 'knifing off': Laub & Simpson, 2003). Importantly, participants who said their friends pressured them to offend were more likely to identify cutting off these friendship groups as a catalyst for change, compared to participants whose friends had not applied this pressure (88%, *n* = 14 vs 51%, *n* = 51; Fischer's exact = 0.007).

Meanwhile, 44% (*n* = 46) said friends had made it harder for them to desist, compared to 33% (*n* = 36), who said they had been supportive. More than half (55%, *n* = 46) reported that they had committed an offence with a friend, showing how closely their offending was tied to their peer networks. For some participants, friendships were seemingly *dependent* on continued offending: 14% (*n* = 16) said that their friends made them feel like they had to offend and 13% (*n* = 14) said they were worried about losing friends, if they stopped.

Figure 8: Proportion of survey participants who identified friends as a catalyst for and/or barrier to change (%)



Note: Excludes information for 2 participants. Total does not equal 100 because categories were not mutually exclusive

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

The interviews and qualitative survey responses again provide insights into friendships as both catalysts and barriers for change. Friendships were described as providing emotional

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

intimacy, closeness and feelings of support, which are consistent with 'relational goods' that are emergent from relationships with others (Weaver & McNeill, 2015). For some, their strongest supports came from peers they met in recovery and treatment contexts. For example, Laura described her friends from an alcohol and other drugs (AOD) program as her 'ride or die' supports, who she could call on at any time.

Meanwhile, participants also spoke about their friendships as facilitating opportunities for offending, friends as influencing their decision-making, and also as being part of the broader set of environmental conditions that increased their risk of reoffending.

> *Every time I got out of jail, I went back to the same house the same people the same environment and was exposed to the same drugs and the same stresses including the same place who wouldn't let me move on with my life (Female, 45-54 yrs, Indigenous status unknown).*
>
> *If there is a group of people around me who also do illegal things, it is very easy for me to be influenced by them and continue to make mistakes (Male, 25-34 yrs, Aboriginal).*
>
> *The friends I hung out with during adolescence affected my decisions at the time (Female, 18-24 years old, non-Indigenous).*

Further, during the focus group, Tina explained that, she wanted to stop offending, but if she saw her friends and they wanted to offend, she felt obligated to join in rather than 'ruin their fun'. Similarly, several focus group participants said that boredom often led them back into old peer groups, which in turn led to further offending.

As such, it is not surprising that many survey and interview participants observed that cutting off (also known as : see Maruna, 2001) their friendship groups had been important for their desistance. Maia said that when she went into AOD treatment, she completely removed herself from all social media and got rid of her contact lists to stop her from reconnecting with her former friendship group. She said this was because she knew would find it hard to 'dabble', as ' at some point I'm going to have a weak moment, or someone's going to enable me or whatever'.

Importantly, while Maia said that this was an important decision for her and necessary for her longer-term desistance, she was very lonely as a result. As previously described, this period of social isolation appears to have been one of the factors that contributed to her subsequent relapse into drug use and offending.

This tension, with friends being both a catalyst for and barrier to change, was discussed by Matty and Cameron during the focus group. Interestingly, instead of knifing off friendship groups, they stressed the importance of having enough self-control to be able to resist opportunities for offending that may present themselves, when they spend times with friends and family members, while also still maintaining these friendships. This demonstrates the interaction between cognitive shifts and peer networks in desistance processes.

> *Cameron: I tried at first to disconnect myself from everyone, but you end up just lonely, if you know what I mean, as well. And that can be worse…So you can either disconnect yourself from everybody, and end up lonely, and then that sort of – you start thinking about, you know, slipping up again and*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

that. And then it's just a catch-22 either way. So yeah. And then you've got to learn to be able to associate with your friends and stuff and then not fall back into the same pathway, still be able to, you know, still be able to associate, and still have some sort of relationship.

Matty: Yeah, even though you're doing something else, like, drugs and whatever, you just don't bring it up.

Cameron: Yeah, yeah.

Matty: Just spin a yarn, that's it.

Interviewer: So, it's kind of on you to put those boundaries in place.

Cameron: Yeah. I mean, like, if it's someone that's trying to push you to do some, then don't have anything to do with them. But if they're not trying to push it on you and still can be your friend...it's human nature. You can't be alone all the time.

Key finding

Friendships played a dual role in participants' desistance journeys. For many, supportive friendships — including those formed in recovery and treatment settings — provided role models and a sense of belonging that encouraged change. For others, offending was deeply tied to their peer networks, and desistance required the difficult step of distancing themselves from old friends.

4.3.4 Intimate partners

Intimate partner relationships emerged as a catalyst for change for 81% (*n* = 87) of participants:

- 50% (*n* = 52) did not want to let their partner down,
- 38% (*n* = 39) were worried their partner would leave them, if they continued to offend, and
- 34% (*n* = 35) said they wanted to be able to support their partner.

Further, almost half of the participants who had ever been in a relationship said that their partner had tried to help them to stop offending (46%, *n* = 48), while 19% (*n* = 20) said meeting their partner was a catalyst for change.

However, 38% (*n* = 40) said that that their intimate partner had been a barrier to desistance (Figure 9). A third (34%, *n* = 27) said that a current or a former partner had made it harder for them to stop offending. It was also common for participants to report that their partners had been in contact with the justice system and/or co-offended with them:

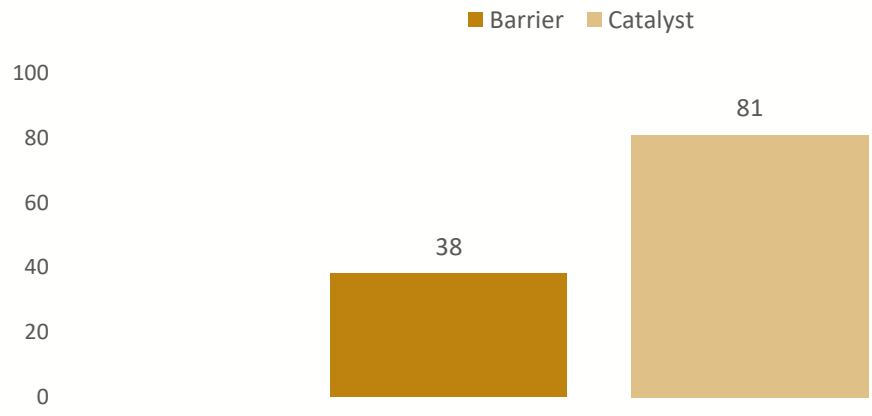
- 39% (*n* = 41) said a current or former intimate partner had been proceeded against or found guilty for an offence,
- 30% (*n* = 32) said a current or former intimate partner had been incarcerated, and

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

- 21% (*n* = 22) said they had committed a crime with a current or former intimate partner.

Consistent with family relationships, only a small proportion of participants said that their partner had made them feel like they had to offend (11%, *n* = 11).

Figure 9: Proportion of survey participants who identified current or former intimate partners as a catalyst and/or barrier to change (%)



Note: Sample limited to participants who said they had ever been in a relationship. Total does not equal 100 because categories were not mutually exclusive

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

The interviews provide further insights into the role of intimate partners in desistance journeys, primarily focusing on relationships as a barrier. Some interview participants reflected that their partner had facilitated their entry into offending, by introducing them to drugs or involving them in their own offending. For some of the female participants, their involvement in offending was interwoven with their relationships with abusive partners, who coerced their partners into engaging in offending. For example, Laura reflected that her partner had encouraged her involvement in property offending as a way of supporting both of their drug habits. In addition, some female participants reflected that their use of drugs and consequent offending behaviours were exacerbated by abusive relationships, with their drug use becoming a coping mechanism for dealing with the abuse.

Female participants' relationships with abusive partners also had implications for their access to children, in some cases contributing to child protective services removing them from their care or minimising their access. This in turn further contributed to their offending, as they no longer had the relationship with their children to motivate desistance.

> *I met a dealer, an ice dealer, and a really violent, awful one, and I moved in with him immediately, and then I couldn't have the kids. I was trying to get – like, I'd use through the week and then Friday would come and I'd stop using, and it was just chaotic (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*

However, Laura also said that a previous partner had supported a period of non-offending, which lasted the duration of their marriage (approximately 10 years). She attributed this to his non-involvement in offending, and her desire to remain in the relationship, which she thought would be jeopardised by her drug use and offending.

CABINET

CABINET

The small number of men who reflected on the role of their intimate relationships in their desistance generally described their partners as contributing to their criminalisation because of 'conflict' within the relationship. In other words, some male participants said that they would have arguments with their partner, which would lead to police intervention and their criminalisation, primarily through charges being laid against them for intimate partner violence-related offences. These statements provided by male interview participants require careful examination. The literature has demonstrated that men using abusive behaviours often minimise and deny their use of abusive behaviours (Boxall et al., 2023), while also blaming their partner for their use of aggressive behaviours. In both instances where male interview participants blamed their partners for their criminalisation, they were the respondent on a domestic or family violence order.

Key finding

Intimate partner relationships played a complex and often contradictory role in desistance journeys. For many participants, partners were powerful catalysts for change—providing motivation to stop offending, support for desistance efforts, and stability in daily life. At the same time, intimate partners were also a frequent barrier, with some introducing participants to drugs or offending, co-offending with them, or exerting coercive and abusive control that fuelled criminal behaviour. Women in particular described how abusive relationships both exacerbated their offending and undermined protective factors such as parenting. These findings highlight that intimate relationships can both foster and hinder desistance, with their impact shaped by gendered power dynamics, substance use, and broader family contexts.

4.3.5 Summary

Across children, family, friends, and intimate partners, participants described relationships as both powerful motivators for change and significant barriers to desistance. Many had people in their lives who provided encouragement, practical help, and positive role models, while at the same time being surrounded by others who reinforced offending through co-offending, substance use, or pressure/coercion. It was particularly notable that a small number of participants believed that they would lose valued relationships, if they stopped offending. This duality highlights that desistance is rarely shaped by relationships that are wholly supportive or wholly undermining; instead, people often navigate a mix of positive and negative influences, with role models that can inspire change co-existing alongside those that entrench offending.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

4.4 External factors

While internal changes, such as cognitive shifts and maturation, were central to participants' motivation to desist, many also emphasised the importance of external conditions in supporting or undermining change. Employment, education, housing, and community connections shaped the opportunities available to participants and their ability to sustain progress. These factors highlight that desistance is not only about personal choice or willpower, but also about the wider social and economic environment.

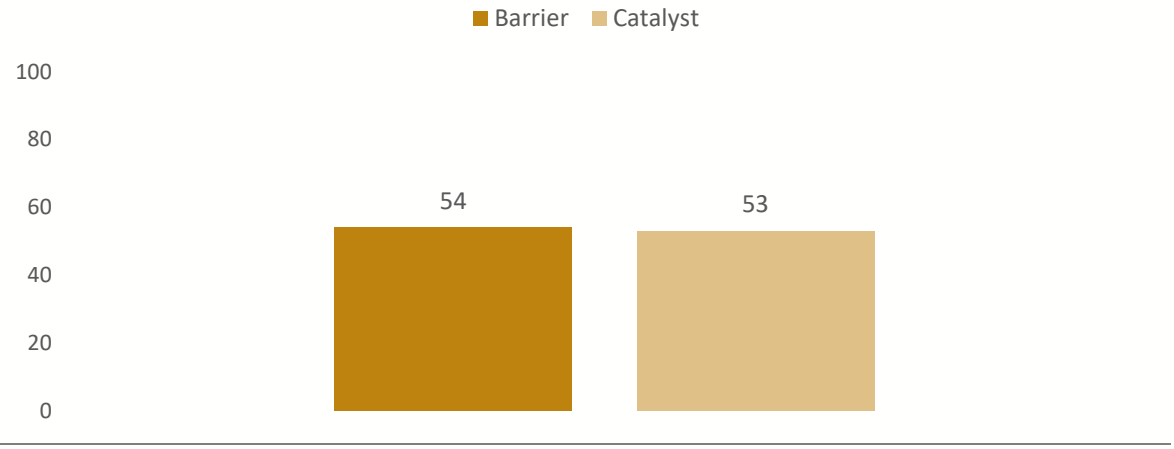
4.4.1 Employment and financial stability

Similar proportions of survey participants identified employment as a barrier to (54%, *n* = 61) and catalyst for change (53%, *n* = 59; Figure 10).

About a third (32%, *n* = 35) said that they were motivated to stop offending, because they got a job they liked; did not want to lose their job; and/or were studying for a better job and career, suggesting that they did not want to jeopardise their future employability through offending. A smaller proportion said that their motivation stemmed from getting a job that paid more (14%, *n* = 16).

Meanwhile, unemployment and financial insecurity more generally were viewed as barriers to desistance. A third of survey participants said that they had no other way to earn money (39%, *n* = 43), while 40% (*n* = 44) said needing more income than their job/benefits gave them (40%, *n* = 44) made it harder for them to stop.

Figure 10: Proportion of survey participants who identified employment as a catalyst and/or barrier for change (%)



Note: Total does not equal 100 because categories were not mutually exclusive.

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

In explaining the importance of employment, participants primarily focused on financial stability and being able to support themselves and their families. Some participants reported that their offending was related to their need to earn money for these purposes, as well as to sustain drug addictions.

> *I have issues personally which mean I can never actually live my life as the person I am without a substantial amount of money to pay for the medical*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *bills required to become that person… This desperate need for reaching that financial goal has been the driving force in my inability to stop committing crime as this became the only possible method capable of being achieved while I still even remotely retained some youth (Non-binary non-Indigenous person, 25-34 yrs)*
>
> *Prices of food going up and being a mum of multiple kids full time it's very expensive just to keep food on the table and I don't like my kids not having food in the cupboards and in their bellies. Also I have my own drug addiction that shouldn't and won't affect my kids so I have to hustle on the side so I can use my drug of choice (Aboriginal woman, 25-34 yrs).*

Meanwhile, other participants said that being able to pay off debts gave them more space and time to focus on their recovery. As one survey participant explained, 'I finally paid off some debt. That pressure easing up helped me think straight'. For some participants, employment represented an opportunity for them to increase their self-esteem and confidence, in addition to giving structure to their day. All of these were viewed as being important for maintaining their desistance.

Relatedly, being involved in meaningful employment, which typically involved some form of service delivery or working with justice-involved people or those struggling with addiction, was viewed positively. Participants who were involved in this line of work, or working towards this as a future goal, talked about being able to help others, as part of their recovery. For example, Laura said that working with other women who had AOD issues gave her a sense of purpose and contributed to feelings of generativity (discussed in more detail below 4.4.4).

> *I'm a support worker at the moment and I'd love to become a case worker. I love doing this. Like, yeah, it's so cool. Like, you know, there's the heartache involved as well, but working with addicts, and I think I have that experience, and I just think that my experience may help somebody else. And it's just nice when you see one person make it, you know? But yeah. I absolutely – I love that I work in this industry (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*

Consistent with other Australian research, many of the participants identified significant barriers to getting and maintaining employment (Graffam et al., 2004). This was described primarily as an eligibility barrier, with justice-involved people failing to pass criminal record checks and so becoming ineligible for many jobs. As demonstrated in the below extract from the focus group, this not only meant that participants could not obtain employment, but it also had a negative impact on their self-esteem.

> *Tina: The biggest issue for people who have [unclear] lifestyle is getting a job, because of their criminal record. I know a few people in the community, I've known them since they were little kids, they got a job, and as soon as they did a police check, they were out the door. It's getting the job and not keeping it because of the criminal history, the record stands in their way. That's something that needs to be changed.*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *Elder: And then they get depressed and then…*
>
> *Interviewer: And it's the same cycle.*
>
> *Elder: The same cycle. They go back to doing the same thing. It depresses them, because they had a job and then they got fired, makes them feel terrible about themselves.*

Dylan similarly said that his criminal history had closed off employment opportunities for him, such as military service and working for the government. He reflected that this felt like a missed opportunity to use his experiences of incarceration to inform justice system reform and practice, saying 'something else can build from it'.

Similar barriers emerged in relation to Working with Vulnerable People (WWVP) checks, with some participants describing their criminal record as meaning they could not engage in meaningful employment working with justice-involved people. For example, one survey participant recalled that, after being convicted of a violent offence, he had stopped using drugs and alcohol and become a health service provider, working with people who had AOD-related issues. When the terms of his employment changed and he was required to get his WWVP check, his prior offending was discovered and he lost his job. He described this as a major setback in his recovery and he was once again in active addiction, almost 10 years later, at time of completing the survey.

Another participant reflected that her history of offending would make it difficult for her to get registered as sports coach, which she said she was very motivated to do and had done in the past. She identified this as unique to the ACT context, saying that she had justice-involved friends in other jurisdictions, where this was not a barrier to their employment.

Given that several participants found involvement with other people with lived experience motivating for their desistance journeys, suggests that the benefits of having people with justice system experience involved in roles are likely to outweigh the risks. This needs further consideration, in light of the fact that most jurisdictions in Australia have Working with Children checks, not the more expansive WWVP model adopted by the ACT.

Key finding

Employment and financial stability were powerful motivators for change. Participants described jobs as providing income, structure, and self-esteem, as well as opportunities to contribute to others. At the same time, unemployment, financial insecurity, and restrictions, such as criminal record and WWVP checks, often undermined desistance. This created frustration, exclusion, and in some cases even relapse.

4.4.2 Housing

The participants in this study appeared to have relatively more stable housing, with 44% of survey respondents (n = 48) indicating that they had lived in their own home or family residence for most of the previous 12 months, while 31% (n = 34) had mostly lived with a friend or family member. However, 17 participants (16%) reported that they had mostly slept 'rough', on the street, in their car, a tent, squat or shelter; five (5%) had mostly been in prison/youth detention; and a further five (5%) reported 'other' as their main place of residence.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

A quarter of survey participants (28%, *n* = 25) said that finding a stable place to live supported their desistance journeys. For example, Lucy transferred to a new place with Housing ACT, which was a 'clean start, clean slate, and that was wonderful. I had amazing support from the Housing Justice team'. Conversely, others identified a lack of housing as a barrier to desistance. This is reflected in the below quotes from interview participants.

> *I was homeless for about, like, six months, or whatever. And then yeah, stuff just, yeah, kept getting more and more out of hand… There's lots of things that could have prevented that from happening. Suitable housing, fucking – any number of things (Lewis, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *If we had housing, we'd be all right, because we know with a roof over our head, we don't have to go out and try and get money for accommodation or – you know? (Tina, 25-34 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *What grinds my gears is that for the amount that it costs the government to keep me in jail for one week, they could have put me through three months of rehab. And I would have been able to walk out of rehab into a house. Not putting people back out on the streets who are homeless, you know, you've got one issue that leads to another issue leads to another issue (Maia, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous female)*
>
> *People need housing, and I guess that's a big one. And I don't know why it's become so hard for people, when it's time for them to re-enter the community, that the housing is so hard for them to find. And a lot of the time it's, like, a thing that blocks them from their earliest release and all of that sort of stuff, appropriate housing and somewhere to stay, and all of those things (Dylan, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Focus group participants argued that the absence of halfway accommodation for people transition out of imprisonment led to further criminalisation, through the denial of parole. They said that to support desistance, people had to be able to return to the community, which necessarily required access to housing.

> *Matty: Now they say, like, you need an address to get out. Whether, like, you're just giving them a random address just to get out, you know? And then you're going to be homeless. That's just fucked…but you can't get access to Justice Housing, because it's really limited…*
>
> *Cameron: Parole don't have [unclear] housing or anything. They don't.. Help us get some housing going….*
>
> *Elder: And that's the reason why we want a halfway house. When people get released from jail they don't have anywhere to go, the halfway house should be the place to send them. And all of this government shit – nothing's come of it… They've got it in every other state.*

There was a perception that more housing support was available for men than women, as these quotes illustrate:

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *I've noticed when the males are getting out, like, they have help with housing and everything. Like, they've got houses to go to. So, like, I think me being still in the system and still going through court and that, is me not having my own property. Like, I lost my house in 2017 when I went to jail, for a period of two years. But my understanding, everyone else that's gone into custody, they've been able to pay $5 a week and keep their property. So, like, yeah, there's not much support for the females. Nothing at all (Tina, 25-34 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *…the funding [in the Justice Housing Program] for men is very different for what it is for women. They really do lack the support for women. Like most programs, they lack the support for women (Lucy, 45-54 years, non-Indigenous female).*

The barriers to accessing housing in the ACT described by participants is supported by recent research examining the support needs of people involved in the criminal justice system (Doyle et al., 2024; Rossner et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2023; Taylor & Bartels, 2025).

4.4.3 Education

Overall, rates of education were very low among survey participants. However, going back to school was only identified as a catalyst for change by 9% of survey participants (*n* = 10).

The interviews help explain this. Several interview participants had already completed higher levels of education before their offending, so further study was unlikely to influence their behaviour. One participant completed a university degree in prison, but explained that this was motivated by a desire to better understand the prison system, rather than to support desistance.

For those with lower levels of education, returning to school was not seen as a direct barrier or catalyst for change desistance. Instead, participants framed education as part of the wider disadvantage that constrained their opportunities to live non-offending lives. Their immediate priorities were survival needs — stable housing (see 4.4.2), AOD treatment (see 4.5.2), and employment (see 4.4.1) — rather than formal education. In this context, participants placed greater value on vocational training and certifications (such as construction 'white cards'), which were perceived as more practical and immediately useful in supporting efforts to desist.

4.4.4 Community connections

Three-quarters of participants (75%, *n* = 83) said that their community increased their motivation to desist. The most common reasons were becoming more connected to community life (43%, *n* = 48), wanting to be a good community member (39%, *n* = 43), and wanting to use their experiences to help others (37%, *n* = 41; Figure 11). A smaller group (17%, *n* = 19) identified religion as a motivator. Participants drew on a wide range of community spaces, including men's sheds, sports clubs, churches, and other religious groups, to foster more positive connections with community.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

Figure 11: Proportion of survey participants who identified community as a catalyst or barrier for change (%)



a: Limited to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Community connections facilitated desistance in various ways. For example, as demonstrated in the below quotes from survey participants, community connections as providing opportunities for discussing their issues and problems, which in turn supported healing and recovery.

> *I got help through a single dads' network (Aboriginal male, 25-34 yrs).*
>
> *The barber shop where I hung out became my safe space (Torres Strait Islander woman, 45-54 yrs).*
>
> *Someone from the local mosque checked on me regularly (Torres Strait Islander, 25-34 yrs (gender not provided).*

Participants also said community activities provided them with structure and alleviated their boredom, while others said their new community connections helped them access services and supports that they needed.

> *The boxing gym kept me off the streets (Aboriginal man 25-34 yrs).*
>
> *A bloke from a veterans' group helped me sort out my benefits (Torres Strait Islander woman, 35-44 yrs).*

However, the main benefit of community connections appeared to be a feeling of purpose and self-esteem, which was attributable to feeling like they were making positive contribution. This is consistent with the concept of generativity; by contributing to the next generation, individuals can develop a sense of purpose and new identity that is consistent with desistance (see 2.1.4). It is also one of the ways in which they can 'make good', which involves both

CABINET

making amends for the harm their offending has caused, and also demonstrating to others that they have changed (McNeill & Maruna, 2007). Generative work looked different for participants, involving activities like volunteering with community-based organisations (e.g., the local Church, gym, animal shelters), establishing services that benefitted the community directly (e.g., a community care repair co-op), creative works (e.g., art, carpentry and crafting), and, as previously described, caring for children (see 4.3.1).

For others, generativity involved helping other people who were in contact with the justice system. For example, during his incarceration, Dylan helped other inmates with their paperwork, and to navigate the service support system, which he found very fulfilling. He even did some advocacy work during this time, to try and improve the program offerings in the AMC: 'I put some ideas forward, and wrote some documents and made some complaints and did all sorts of advocating for programmes related stuff'. Importantly, Dylan acknowledged that his ability to do this work was facilitated by his relative privilege; he was were literate, was educated and had good communication skills.

> *I was able to tap into [my existing skills] straight away, to help with my process, and help others as well, you know, because I got great satisfaction from someone trusting me and asking me for help, and me doing whatever I can for them… I was there for other people, and trying to help them through the process and all of that sort of stuff (Dylan, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Similarly, James described mentoring other inmates, to motivate them to work towards non-offending and to see alternative futures for themselves.

> *A few boys from 18 to 21 I took under my wing, I said 'you're going to be like a little brother to me, but I'm going to speak tough love, and I'm going to speak truth to you. Are you okay with that?' I'm going to change it – and they come to me and they go, you know, I want to do this, this and this, [inaudible]. And I go: 'sit, breathe, and the fact that you're talking to me about it is really good'. They made positive changes because I was sitting there in that cell with them, from my experience, a heart to heart, that makes them – it attaches (James, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*

The point made by James about how his mentorship and advice likely resonated moreso with his fellow inmates because he was speaking from a place of lived experience is supported by other research which has found that offenders respond more positively when services are delivered by lived experience experts. We discuss this in more detail in later sections of this report (4.6).

Some interview participants spoke about their desire to use their experiences to help others to avoid offending as well. For example, Frank created a Youtube channel to help other men struggling with mental health issues:

> *It's about showing these people that suffer the same stuff that I do, it's about showing them that 99% of their recovery, and 99% of the success, is going to come from within them. It's not going to come from anywhere*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *external. The hard work is within. I promote that it's very easy to start. It's very easy to get up in the morning and look at yourself in the mirror and say something good about yourself (Frank, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Further, Laura was working in the AOD treatment space at time of being interviewed, which she experienced as being meaningful and affirming.

> *hopefully my experience can inform others, you know? …being able to talk to those people and them listen, and want to do things better, and that being different – it's like [unclear] the drug and alcohol, leading into that, I just think, I don't know, I'm really motivated by it. And it's empowering, it's really cool (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*

However, community could also be a barrier to desistance, with 36% of survey participants (*n* = 40) saying that crime was common where they lived, which made it harder to stop offending. In turn, 22% (*n* = 24) said that moving away from their neighbourhood was a catalyst for change.

For Indigenous participants, cultural connection was also a significant catalyst for change. One quarter (25%, *n* = 14) said learning about and engaging with culture supported their desistance. This appeared to be facilitated through meeting and forming relationships with Elders and respected community members, participating in 'on Country' activities, as well as creative activities.

> *Gardening with the old fellas in the community was surprisingly healing (Aboriginal woman, 35-44 yrs).*
>
> *I did a cooking course run by a local Auntie (Aboriginal woman, 25-34 yrs)*
>
> *I took part in a mobile art van that visits through rough areas (Aboriginal, 25-34 yrs, gender not specified)*

Further, it is important to note that all of the above quotes from survey participants which highlight the importance of community connections are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. While a similar proportion of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants identified community connections as an important catalyst for change (76% vs 74%), when asked 'what else' had supported their desistance, many Indigenous participants wrote about community connections. By contrast, non-Indigenous participants did not expand on this issue in qualitative comments, instead focusing on cognitive changes and their individual wellbeing.

Key finding

Community connections were both a catalyst for and a barrier to desistance. For many, involvement in cultural, sporting, and community activities fostered purpose, structure, and self-worth, consistent with generativity. Yet, for over a third, living in high-crime neighbourhoods undermined these gains. For Indigenous participants, cultural connection was especially significant, with community ties emerging as central to their desistance journeys.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

CABINET

CABINET

4.5 Health and wellbeing

The links between trauma and crime are well established (see e.g., Malvaso et al. 2022; McAra & McVie, 2022; Burke et al., 2023). The participants in this study had likewise experienced significant trauma, as the following comments powerfully illustrate:

> *And obviously it's my trauma, my childhood trauma [from sexual abuse] and stuff coming through, but yeah, I was doing stuff like that…there's nobody in jail that I know that doesn't take drugs and alcohol. And then there's nobody in jail that I know that hasn't experienced trauma. It's just the way it is. So, if you're … not fixing any of that. (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *You know, we were all a victim at some point first, before we became offenders, or perpetrators. That's a big thing that I don't think a lot of people understand that haven't been through that…People have been dealt a shit hand… and I think that, you know, that's something that we don't consider enough, is, like, the victimisation of people prior to their offending (Maia, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous female).*
>
> *So I first came into contact with the criminal justice system when I was about 14 …and I had a heroin habit [then]…I was sexually assaulted at a young age (Lucy, 45-54 years, non-Indigenous female).*
>
> *When I was younger, I ran away from home to the streets, to escape abuse…and started using cannabis when I was about eight years old… I've come from a childhood of extreme abuse, including sexual abuse, and I've faced mental health issues because of that (Frank, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *because of the trauma I suffered growing up, and my untreated C-PTSD … I received many beatings (James, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Participants reported complex and overlapping health issues. Two-thirds (65%, *n* = 68) had a diagnosed mental health condition and a high proportion (43%, *n* =46) had been hospitalised at some point as a result. Dependence on alcohol or other drugs was widespread: 63% (*n* = 67) had used illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the past 12 months and many met markers of dependence:

- 66% (*n* = 59) felt they should cut down their drug usage,
- 54% (*n* = 36) used drugs first thing in the morning to settle their nerves/hangover,
- 42% (*n* = 28) were unable to remember what happened the night before, because of drugs, and
- 48% had failed to do what was normally expected of them on a weekly (27%, *n* = 17) or daily (22%, *n* = 14) basis, because of drugs.

Disability was also common, reported by a quarter of participants (26%, *n* = 29).

These issues were not isolated. For most participants, mental health disorders, substance use, and disability intersected, with 18% (*n* = 20) experiencing all three and many more

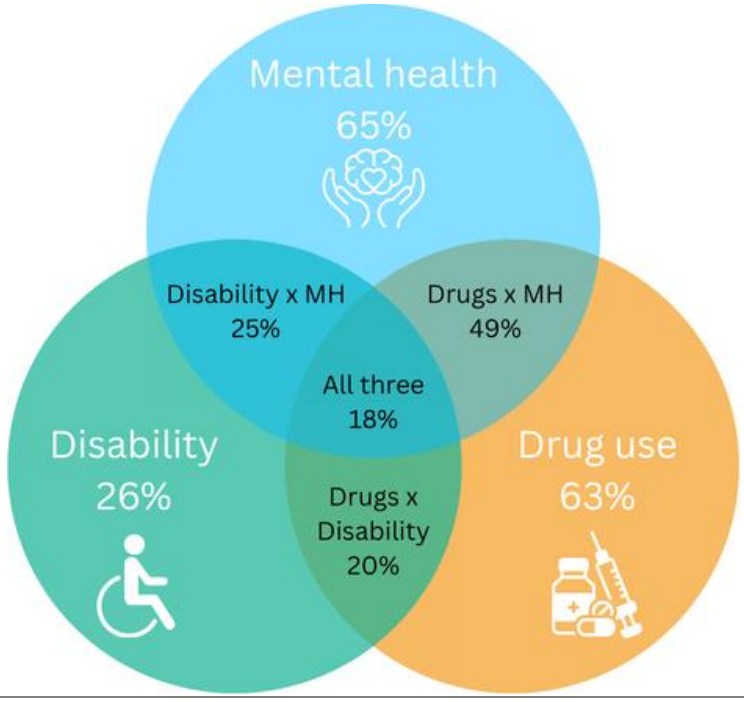
TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

experiencing two of the three issues. This creates cycles of vulnerability that both drove offending and undermined desistance (see Figure 12).

This context helps explain why health and wellbeing supports emerged as catalysts for change for many participants, but also contextualises why barriers such as financial strain, limited service access, and reliance on substances to cope with trauma could make change difficult to sustain. It also supports Link et al.'s call for a 'health-based model of desistance in which both mental and physical dimensions of health affect life chances in the employment and family realms and ultimately recidivism' (2019, p. 544).

Figure 12: Prevalence of drug use, disability and mental health conditions among survey participants (%)



Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

4.5.1 Mental health

A growing body of research recognises the role of mental health in desistance. For example, a longitudinal study in Germany assessed the mental health of 106 young people during incarceration and analysed their criminal careers for up to 15 years post-release (Barra et al., 2022). This revealed that mental health issues predicted perpetration of and desistance from serious, violent and chronic offending.

Over half of the survey participants (54%, *n* = 60) said that addressing their mental issues was a catalyst for change. Analysis of the qualitative data supports the importance of mental health and wellbeing issues for desistance, with participants describing a range of strategies that they had used to manage their mental health issues (Burke et al., 2023; Malvaso et al., 2022; McAra & McVie, 2022). As demonstrated through the below quotes, this included journalling, meditation, talking to others, and therapy with counsellors and psychologists. These outlets were often framed as alternatives to lashing out, bottling up feelings, or returning to offending.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *Therapy helped heaps. Took me ages to open up, but it worked (Aboriginal woman, 25-34 years).*
>
> *I started writing in a journal. Helped me process stuff instead of bottling it up (Aboriginal woman, 35-44 years).*
>
> *I got into meditation. Sounds weird, but it calmed the noise in my head (Aboriginal man, 25-34 years).*
>
> *Music, mate. Picking up the guitar again helped me express myself without lashing out (Aboriginal man, 25-34 years).*

For some, receiving a mental health or disability-related diagnosis was itself a catalyst, offering new insight into their behaviours. For example, one survey participant said ' *I got diagnosed with ADHD. Knowing what was going on helped heaps'*, while Lucy 'got a proper diagnosis when I got out of jail this time'. Laura had been diagnosed with ADHD earlier in her life, but it was only recently that:

> *I got the funding that I didn't know about, and yeah, went through that process, thank goodness, because that really, really helped…It sort of changed my life a fair bit…I was kind of just muddling through. You know, I guess I was – I was intelligent enough to do it, to do the work, but I just couldn't concentrate, I couldn't focus. It was just all a bit – there was no planning involved, and I couldn't sit down for any length of time and study. And once I had the medication, oh, it was amazing. I was sitting there for three hours, finishing two assignments, and I just went, oh my God! That's different. And then I was kicking goals, and I was ahead. It changed a lot of things. Changed my self-esteem as well around it (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*

However, again consistent with other research (Agbaria et al., 2024; Nishar et al., 2023), participants identified significant barriers to engaging and sustaining mental health care – most notably financial. Many mental health services are limited to 6-10 subsidised sessions per calendar year (Australian Government, 2025). However, a small number of participants who accessed victims of crime compensation for historical experiences of child sexual abuse were able to afford long-term private therapy. As Frank explained:

> *I got a pay-out and some assistance from the government for being a victim of crime, and they put me onto a list of therapists and psychologists, and I picked one of the most expensive ones I could find, one of the most experienced ones I could find, because they were paying for it, and it turned out to be the best move I ever made (Frank, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

4.5.2 Drug and alcohol addiction

Many participants' involvement in offending was linked to their AOD dependence. For example, 29% of survey participants (n = 13) who had markers of drug dependence had sold

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

or produced illegal drugs in the past 12 months. In other cases, participants were criminalised because they were using illegal drugs.

For some participants, their drug addiction directly contributed to other offending behaviours, particularly acquisitive crimes to fund their addictions. As Laura reflected:

> *I wouldn't have been going and doing any of that crime on a daily basis, returns or stealing stuff or, you know, much worse things, if I didn't have a drug habit, there's no way (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*

Unsurprisingly, a large proportion of survey participants said their drug addiction was a barrier to desistance (42%, *n* = 47; Figure 13). Yet, experiences varied. A third of participants who appeared to be dependent on drugs at time of the survey (33%, *n* = 15) did **not** identify their drug addiction as a barrier to desistance. Further, a small group did not see sobriety as realistic or desirable, describing drugs as essential for coping with trauma. This is reflected in the quotes below from Lewis and Tina.

> *No, that's [sobriety] not my goals at all. I was on the [AOD program in the AMC] program for reasons, I never have and never will intend to get clean though. I'll get clean for a bit, so that stuff works better, but sobriety is not my goal. I'd rather kill myself (Lewis, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *I started offending back when I was 13, I had something bad happen to me when I was a kid by a family member, and I have not been straight, a day sober since. I try to tell my Correctional Services worker, like, I want to get off the drugs, and I want to stop using, but it's going to be very hard, and it's going to be very triggering. Because I've not been off it since that stuff happened to me. And when I think to get off the drugs, like, I get real bad panic attacks, and it stresses me out. And I just freak out and think what am I going to do. Like – so yeah. I've had the drugs masking it. (Tina, 25-34 years, Indigenous female)*

Even Laura, who had not offended for several years at time of the interview and was sober reflected that she had had difficulties motivating herself to attend drug treatment, because of the effect drugs had on masking the symptoms of her unresolved trauma:

> *I didn't know what I wanted, but I just knew that maybe staying clean was the goal. And I didn't even really want to, at first, because I thought my feelings were going to kill me too. You know, I had no drugs on board, and I've got to live in the world, with all my trauma and everything, and try and survive it. And yeah, but, you know, I also had a psychologist, and I worked through that stuff, with the rehab (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*

The views of interview participants are supported by the survey data. Among participants who were dependent on drugs and had also been diagnosed with a mental health condition, 75% (*n* = 12) said their drug use was not a barrier to desistance. This aligns with the perceived role of substance use as a coping mechanism, in light of the concurrent mental health issues, even if this might not be objectively justified

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

At the same time, treatment for addiction was also catalyst for change. Over half (54%, *n* = 60) said that stopping or reducing drug use helped them move away from offending, while 22% (*n* = 24) said the same about alcohol. Participants highlighted the value of day programs, harm-minimisation approaches, and long-term counselling in supporting recovery:

> *I got sober. Kicked the booze, and things started looking clearer (Aboriginal male, 25-34 years).*
>
> *Things like the day program. Harm minimise program with crs have been amazing and has definitely helped me (Non-Indigenous woman, 35-44 years).*

Interestingly, two interview participants described their use of drugs as *supporting* their desistance journeys. James, for example, described his use of medical cannabis (which parole was aware of and supported) as essential for managing his ADHD, autism and the symptoms of his complex PTSD.

> *I'd actually be dead right now, if I didn't have cannabis, I'm 100% certain. Because there was places, where I was so low that it was beyond that I needed a drink, that I was actually en route to the mental health ward (James, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Importantly, his community corrections officer was aware of and supportive of James' use of medical cannabis. He also saw it as being part of a broader approach, noting: 'if you don't know yourself, and you don't know how to medicate properly, you don't know your feelings, or you're not in control, the norm is to grab a drink, break your parole, go back in'.

In addition, Frank described his one-time use of psychedelics (which he had obtained illegally) as being transformational, supporting his ability to engage more meaningfully in his therapy. He felt that:

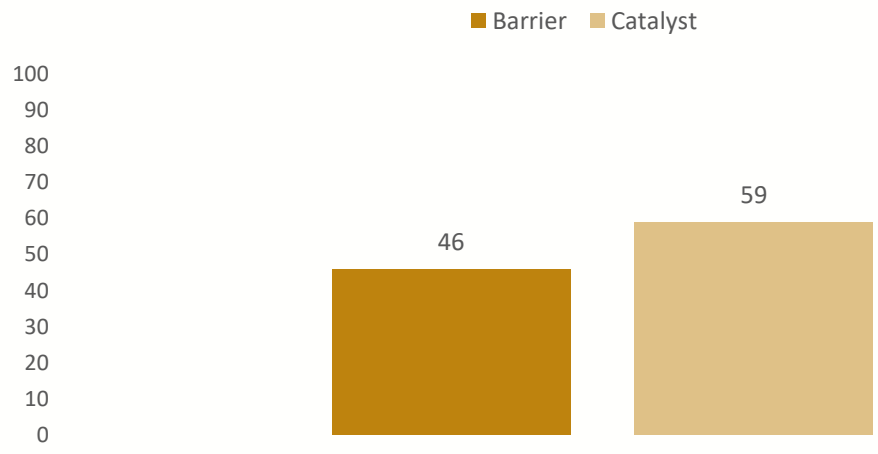
> *it's rewired my brain in a lot of ways, because I don't stress about the small stuff anymore, I don't worry about the small stuff…and I've realised that I could have solved it so long ago if I just woke up sooner (Frank, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

However, he added that he would 'never use it again, don't get me wrong, and I won't exactly recommend it to people either, but what I will say to people is – just have an open mind'.

In 2023, the Therapeutic Goods Administration authorised the use of psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression and MDMA for PTSD (Australian Government, 2023). The use of psychedelic medication to treat mental health issues is controversial (see e.g., Kunstler et al., 2023), but shows some promise (see Yao et al., 2024 for a recent review). This points to the need for both adequate funding for comprehensive mental health treatment and a flexible approach, that meets individual needs, including a willingness to explore new modalities for complex mental health issues.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

Figure 13: Proportion of survey participants who identified AOD issues as a barrier to change and/or reducing AOD use as a catalyst for change (%)



Note: Total does not equal 100 because categories were not mutually exclusive.

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Key finding

Mental health conditions and drug dependence were deeply intertwined in participants' lives. For many, substance use drove offending and was a clear barrier to desistance. However, for others, drugs were described as essential for coping with trauma and mental health struggles, meaning sobriety was not always seen as realistic or desirable. This highlights the double-edged role of AOD use in desistance journeys: both a major obstacle and, for some, a survival strategy.

4.5.3 Physical health

Link et al. considered a range of ways that correctional agencies should facilitate 'health promotion…including diet, physical activity, improving family relations, and reducing barriers to medical treatment' (2019: 563). To this end, research has started to explore the role of exercise in desistance. For example, Ugelvik et al. (2025) considered the role of long-distance running in supporting desistance. In a scoping review on incarcerated young people, Norman et al. found that

> *Sport programs appeared likely to contribute toward desistance from crime for young people who are incarcerated where they helped to **build links to broader rehabilitation or resettlement programs**, usually using sport as a desistance 'hook' to attract participants to engage with broader programming such as education or job training (Norman et al., 2024, p. 324, emphasis in original).*

Several interviewees raised the improvements to their physical health as helping them to sustain their desistance.

> *I got myself healthy – well, I learned more about health and myself, and became more in tune with my body and understood it, did these great*

CABINET

CABINET

routines to just keep me healthy. I focused on health, and my education, and those things made a big part of my day… I got really fit and strong…So I've maintained that (Dylan, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).

having a job lined up for you and all that would be good, you know, because you're on the right track at that time. You know, because you're healthy and you're feeling fit, and feeling good about yourself (Matty, age unknown, Indigenous male).

I take [my son] on big walks. Like, I took him for a walk … all the way from [XX] all the way down to the Murrumbidgee River (Liam, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).

I know that training is a big protective motivating factor for me, so when I got [out], I started straight away training… it took me two hours on a bus to get to training. I'd train and two hours on a bus home every single day. I did that every night. And no matter how hard it was, I was cold as shit, trying to ride a scooter and catch buses for two hours at nine o'clock at night in the middle of winter, but I knew that that is what kept me safe…I've done all that because I know it's good for me. Good for my mental health, good for my fitness, good for me (Maia, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous female).

I've also lost weight, maintained a healthy routine (James, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).

Now I'm healthier than I've ever been. My mental health is pretty strong right now, to be honest with you. My physical health is great (Frank, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).

These comments speak to both the physical and mental health benefits of getting 'healthy' and 'fit', as well as keeping themselves busy ('off the streets'). None of the interviewees raised barriers to health activities as an issue, but this is worth exploring in future research, especially in light of the comments about financial insecurity below. There may therefore be scope to provide brokerage or other support to those wishing to engage in fitness activities (e.g., subsidised gym memberships).

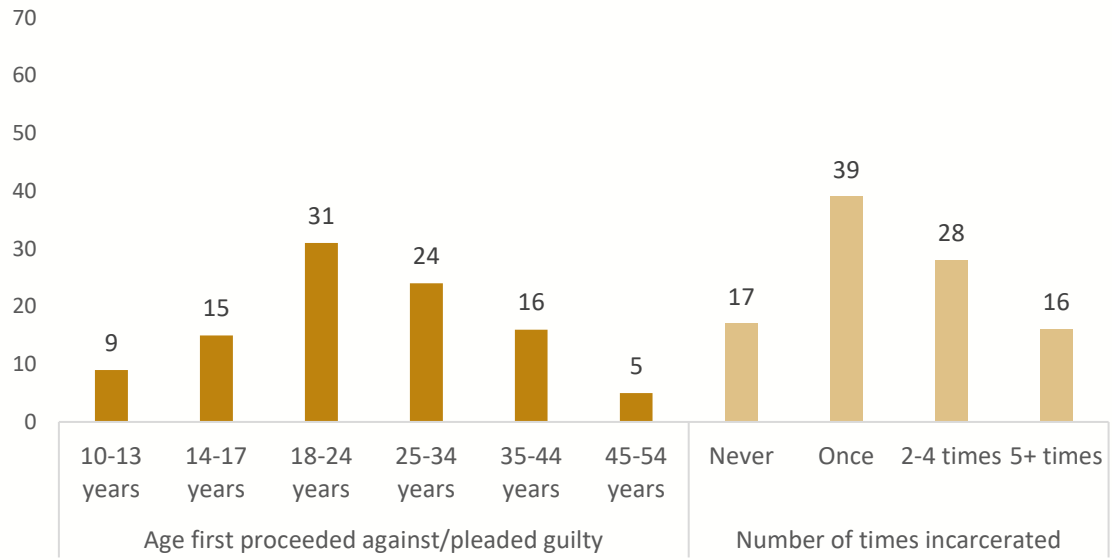
TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

4.6 Contact with the criminal justice system

Survey participants had extensive histories of contact with the justice system. For many participants, this contact started at a young age; 9% (*n* = 10) had first been proceeded against between the ages 10-13, meanwhile 15% were 14-17 years old (*n* = 16). Further, the majority had been incarcerated during their lifetime (83%, *n* = 92), with 28% (*n* = 31) saying they had been incarcerated 2-4 times, and 16% (*n* = 18) five or more occasions (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Offending histories of survey participants (%)



Note: Total does not equal 100 because of rounding.

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

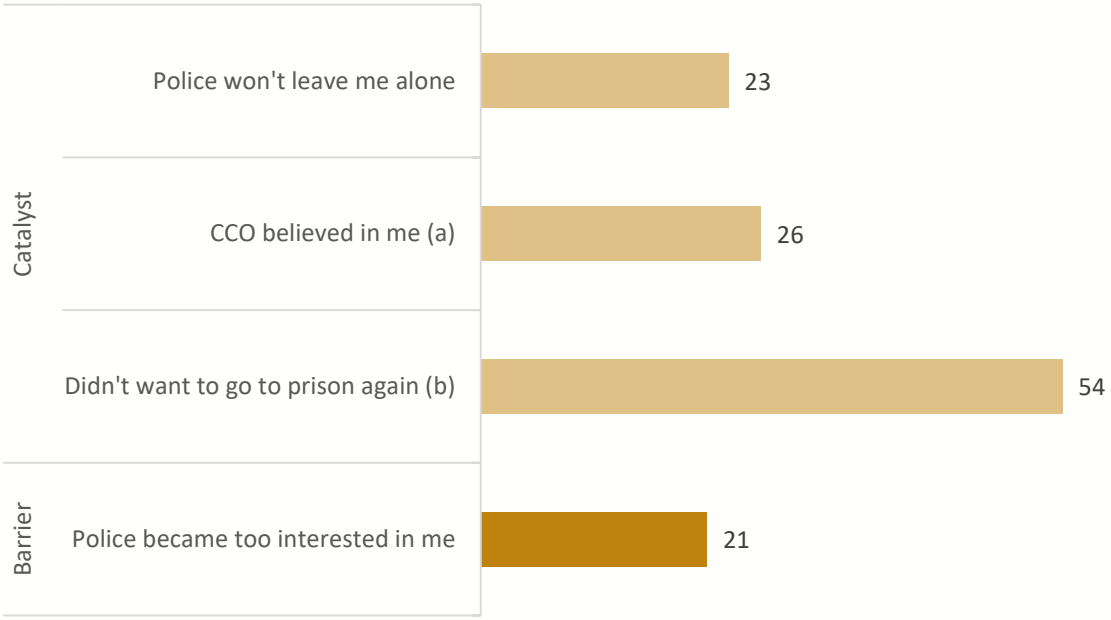
Responses to the survey revealed that 68% (*n* = 75) identified justice system involvement as a catalyst for change. Notably, prison did appear to be exercising a deterrent effect, with 54% of participants (*n* = 49) indicating that they 'didn't want to go to prison again'. More positively, 26% (*n* = 27) said their community correction officer believed in them, which functioned as a catalyst for change.

Perhaps paradoxically, similar proportions reported both that the sense of being the subject of police attention was a catalyst for change ('police became too interested in me': 21%, *n* = 23) and barrier to change ('police won't leave me alone': 23%, *n* = 25; Figure 15). Whether police scrutiny operates as a motivation to develop a non-criminal lifestyle or an impediment to doing so likely depends on a range of factors, including policing practices and non-criminal factors (e.g., opportunities to desist).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Figure 15: Proportion of survey participants who identified justice system involvement as a catalyst and/or barrier for change (%)



Note: Total does not equal 100 because categories were not mutually exclusive.

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

There were mixed views on justice system staff, including Magistrates/Judges, police officers, correction staff and parole/bail officers. For some participants, their positive experiences were due to the practical support provided by justice officers. James, for example, described his relationship with his parole officer as 'great', and provided an example of his parole officer referring him to victim support after he disclosed experiences of child sexual abuse for which he received trauma therapy.

James further spoke about the importance of justice officers treating him like a human being, reflecting on his time inside:

> *if you ask the officers – some, not all – ask for something…they want to make it worse, because it makes them feel a bit better. But then you go up to the one in five, doesn't matter if it's male or female… they can see that this person needs to be treated like a human, and they go – and they'll pull you aside, and they'll try and make contact with you. …when you do meet that one in five, it does help (James, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Laura similarly spoke about the importance of justice officers treating her with compassion and as a human being. She spoke about her positive experience when she appeared before the Galambany Court, and the Magistrate acknowledging her history of sexual victimisation and its role in her offending. She also spoke positively about her experiences with the police in regard to an FVO she had against her abusive ex-partner:

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *I've had the kindest police officers come to my house…And they have been amazing throughout, going through that experience of the FVO being breached over and over again. And having to go to court, and they call me and tell me what's going on, and just, they just really – I don't know if I just got some good ones, but that's been my experience, has been really, really good.*

Meanwhile, Maia said she appreciated justice officers providing her with boundaries and holding her accountable for her actions.

> *[the magistrate] just went 'absolutely no, you're not getting bail'. And rightfully so, I don't blame him for that… [and] my bail officer was strict. He was, like, 'I don't do no-shows, I don't do reschedules. You turn up, you do your testing'….[That was] the best thing that could happen. I don't think – I think that he's great, he's a straight shooter, and he's not there trying to make friends. And if it wasn't for him being that way, I wouldn't have sought the help that I needed (Maia, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous female).*

Unfortunately, as the below quotes demonstrate, many interview participants also had very negative experiences with justice officers and had very low levels of trust as a result. In the worst scenarios, justice officers were accused of lying to people involved in the justice system, or providing false information, or treating them with contempt.

> *you can't rely on the custodial officers, as they say, for anything in there. They straight up lie to you, tell you stuff that's not true, so you don't keep asking them for more forms and shit…They'll mislead you, legal shit, other stuff. And then, like, even if you do get a [legal or medical] form back to them it's 50/50 if it gets to where it's supposed to be going (Lewis, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Meanwhile, other participants said that they were reluctant to engage with the parole/bail officers and tell them the truth about their circumstances, due to fear of being breached.

> *I don't really like to discuss that I'm homeless with them guys [Corrections staff], because, like, I'm meant to be residing as directed. So, like, yeah, like the first thing they want to do is just breach you, not work with you. And so, a lot of people, like … are scared to actually be honest with them and tell them the truth, because they're scared that they're actually going to get breached. So they don't talk with their worker… I've been breached before from telling them that I'm homeless, yeah. So, I don't dare tell them anymore (Tina, 25-34 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *Cameron: They [parole officers] don't help with nothing. They help you breaching….*
>
> *Bill: Fill another form in. Fill another form in. Fill another form in.*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

The Productivity Commission has noted that:

> *Imprisonment may have criminogenic effects (that is, increase the chances of reoffending) because of difficulties adjusting to life post-prison, stigma making it difficult for ex-prisoners to find employment or housing, weakened links with families and friends, and exposure to other prisoners that may provide an 'education in crime' and build networks with criminals (2021: 15, citing Vieraitis et al., 2002).*

This was echoed by the participants in this study, with the impacts of criminal justice system involvement seen as multi-faceted and as a barrier to desistance. For example, Dylan described the conditions of his parole as impacting his ability to participate in community activities with his daughter.

Several commented specifically on the counter-productive effects of incarceration, reflecting that incarceration had the potential to make them 'better at being a crim' through their exposure to other people who were also involved in offending. Frank found it particularly difficult to be around people who brought back the trauma of the childhood abuse he had experienced:

> *I had to be surrounded by the same people that have inflicted so much grief on me. That didn't help, it didn't help at all. It made things a million times worse. And yeah, it took away my ability to stand up for myself, really, because I was so consumed, you know, and so surrounded by it and trapped in it that I couldn't – I really couldn't function, day-to-day, really. I couldn't get anything done. Especially on the legal side of things (Frank, 35-44 years old, non-Indigenous male).*

As highlighted in the following quote from Liam, the criminogenic impact of prison was exacerbated by the absence of relevant and effective programs to divert people from offending (for more on this, see 4.6).

> *All that did was teach how to be so much better at being a crim and introduced me to all the boys. They didn't have anything in the way of programs. We went there, we sat in the fucking – in the block. We paced. We played fucking chess, ping pong, we punched on with each other, trained, got in trouble, put in [segregation], trained... My experience of jail was they've got a lot of room out there, blokes that want to participate but they just – ah, fuck it all. I understand, it's a jail, you know, it's not like you're meant to be there to do anything (Liam, 25-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Several other interview participants also commented on the lack of programs in the AMC:

> *When I was locked in prison, all I wanted to do was engage in therapy and things like that, but you're not allowed to until you've been there for six months (Frank, 35-44 years old, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *There's no rehab for the women in the AMC, but there is for the men, there's the Solaris program. And every month, I would go up as a delegate and say*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *'why can't we have a women's rehab?' And they'd give me: 'there's no funding, there's no money, can't do it' (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *We're just sitting there. And it's so hard…. Like, you're sitting around bored, and then people get into fights because there's nothing to do, and it's just crazy (Tina, 25-34 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *We're bored. We've got nothing to do. And like then you're in custody, they tell you you're going to do work programs, programs… they didn't run the programs (Cameron, 35-44 years, Indigenous male).*
>
> *What happens is that once, when you're on remand, you can't do any programs on remand, you've got to wait till your sentence, and it can take – you know, it takes six, nine months to get sentenced sometimes. So, you're sitting in there, waiting to get sentenced, when you could have done these programs and taken them to court, while you're being sentenced to show, 'well, this is what I'm doing. I know I messed up, but this is what I'm doing to try and fix it, this is where I'm at now'. And, so, it actually would help with your sentence, to get a lesser sentence, because the judge has seen that you're actually trying to make an effort and change (Matty, age unknown, Indigenous male).*

Others spoke about the stigma associated with their prior justice system involvement. This stigma was described as impacting their desistance journeys in different ways. First, there was the described impact of prior incarceration and offending on their subsequent interactions with the justice system, with several participants saying their prior offending increased their likelihood of being further criminalised in the future. This may be because they attract further scrutiny from the police, and harsher sentencing.

> *So, you get this stigma about you, once you've been in the system, they automatically turn to you. It's the same people that go into jail, year in, year out, and yeah, that's one of the biggest things, is that once you've been to jail already that's it, they just think you're a criminal straight away… [But] we're good people. And just that, just certain thing that it's stuffed, you know, you go through life (Matty, age unknow, Indigenous male).*
>
> *Same as the judge. Like, if you've been to jail, they'll just send you straight back to jail again… once you've been to jail, the judges – sometimes you don't even get bail, they just go see you, and you're in jail, no bail. Just bang, yeah. And then, you know, it's just once you go the first time, that's it. Any little bit of trouble that you get in, bang (Matty, age unknown, Indigenous male).*

Meanwhile, as reflected in the below quote from Liam, offending histories also made it more difficult for people to find employment, which had flow-on impacts for financial security and housing.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *The only jobs I can do – because I've got dishonest crimes and shit... I don't get to go on cash register at the local fucking Rebel Sport or something. They don't want me. They're, like, fuck no. Fucking – this guy is dodgy (Liam, 25-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

For others, the stigma associated with their prior offending was experienced in a global way, as being viewed as lesser than, or contemptible. As Cameron said, 'No matter how good we're doing, we're always looked down on'.

Interview and survey participants also described the practical impacts of criminal justice system sanctions. For example, Liam described the loss of license and his criminal record, as limiting his employment options and in turn his ability to desist and 'be good'. The way he described it, the system was setting him up to fail and to make desistance harder for him.

> *When you get in trouble here, they shift everything from you, you know? They take your life, your car, your family, and they take it all off you. And then go: 'Now we're going to let you out and you've got to do really good. Convince us you're going to do good.' And it's, like, how the fuck do I do anything? Like, I can't drive a car, I can't get a job, but I'm meant to fucking pay these fines, and I'm meant to do the right thing, but I'm not allowed to do anything, so what am I going to do? And then you cunts are going to come at me and tell me I'm a fuck-up? Like, no, fuck yous (Liam, 25-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

Survey participants, particularly those who were Indigenous, identified a range of issues when they were subject to community supervision that functioned as barriers to desistance:

> *The conditions of my parole were impossible to meet (Aboriginal male, 25-34 years).*
>
> *I had to check in so often, I couldn't hold down a steady job (Aboriginal male, 25-34 years),*
>
> *I kept getting breached for little things (Aboriginal male, 35-44 years).*
>
> *They put me on a curfew, but I had no stable place to stay (Aboriginal female, 25-34 years).*
>
> *I didn't have a car or money for transport to meet my conditions (Aboriginal female, 35-44 years).*

The comments in this section highlight the need for realistic conditions that promote, rather than hindering, the prospects of desistance. As Henshaw et al. noted, in the context of parole:

> *In the current correctional climate, where pure compliance is preferred over therapeutic assistance, conditional breaches are generally responded to strictly. ...[But] desistance is best understood as a collaborative process, one that requires good faith efforts from both offenders and the state. Arguably,* **parole non-compliance should be understood in terms of the extent to which criminal justice systems facilitate desistance** (emphasis added, references omitted; Henshaw et al., 2019, p. 1417).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

In its current incarnation, there was significant criticism of the criminal justice system. As Liam put it, 'Jail. Fucking – I recommend it for anyone who wants to ruin their life'. However, there were also numerous suggestions on what would be more useful. In particular, there was a desire for more programs, run by people who were passionate about the work, and who had lived experience of the justice system.

> *I think the whole system needs to be rebuilt from the ground up, to be honest. There's not enough of anything to facilitate what the prisoners really, really need (Frank, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *you need to have the motivated people to run the programs, the program has to be right, you have to select the people properly, you have to group them appropriately as well (Dylan, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *I think more education would definitely be a good thing. Get the year 10s and year 12s I'm sure would be really great. Give them something to do, occupy their mind…give them lads something else to do, channel their shit into something and they can be fucking unstoppable. But you fucking bully and harass them and then they go, 'well, fuck the police, I'm just going to be a criminal'. And then they think that shit is cool, and then the next thing you know it's 15 years later, and he's fucking got a needle hanging out his arm, and fucking two kids he doesn't look after, and fucking no teeth left in his head, Give them a chance… Get 'em while they're young, and fucking change their direction. That's how you fix this shit. Because honestly, once they're my age, mate…they're pretty well broken, and it's only a radical fucking change within themselves that will change anything… the kids, the teenagers and the real young fellas, you know, first time offenders, first time-jail – man, fucking, if there's anything other than jail that they can be sent to, that should absolutely be a priority (Liam, 25-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *it's pretty dismal. You think that that [medical] stuff gets treated when you get to jail… [but] it's, like, everybody's just waiting for their date to get out and run amok again. And people don't see a different way… So it's, like, they're not giving people the tools when they're there… (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *The jail itself, too, like, they've got to figure out a better way of…like, instead of locking you up, treating you like an animal, treating you like a baby, they literally – when you go to jail they bring you food…you're called up to get your medication…if you had a bit of independence, you know, it goes a long way…So, when they get out they don't know how to have any life, you know what I mean? So ,they just get themselves locked back up again, because it's easier in there for them…There's these studies over in Sweden and stuff where they do, like, the cottages in the jail. And they've got the lowest … in the world, and that's because of the jail that they go to, that gives them independence… [and] when they go back into society they can do everything... they can function (Matty, age unknown, Indigenous male).*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

These comments are consistent with both earlier findings on the ACT and broader research. For example, previous reports have pointed to the lack of meaningful activity for offenders in the AMC (ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, 2022), while the comments about Galambany Court align with other research locally (Daly et al., 2020) and elsewhere in Australia (Dawkins et al., 2011).

International research has described the potential of prisons as 'reinventive institutions' which 'allow positive forms of moral reflection and change, without the normal harms of punitive sequestration' (Crewe & Ievins, 2020, p. 16). Building on this, Ugelvik (2022) suggested that 'relationships between prisoners and prison staff *can* play a significant, even life-changing, role in assisting desistance processes' (emphasis in original; Ugelvik, 2022, p. 636).

Writing in the South Australian context, Halsey and Harris have suggested that, 'to be effective, community correctional officers need to be viewed by their clients as possible mentors or helpers instead of "screws in plain clothing"' (Halsey & Harris, 2011, p. 89). They also suggested that the use of prisoners' first names would be humanising, for both staff and those incarcerated, while:

> *[h]arder but equally important is to improve the ability of staff and prisoners to speak with each other on equal terms about their concerns – even about their views on crime and its causes, imprisonment, and the process and challenges of desistance. This is a two-sided endeavour that requires change in attitude by both groups in order that constructive, professional and supportive relationships become the norm rather than the exception (Halsey & Harris, 2011, p. 89).*

In fact, they went so far as to suggest that the processes that deny prisoners the capacity to care for themselves, others and the future in 'meaningful, durable and non-violent ways are guaranteed to produce a large cohort of repeat consumers of the carceral enterprise' (2011: 90).

Key finding

Contact with the criminal justice system was a double-edged sword in participants' desistance journeys. While some viewed prison as a deterrent or drew motivation from supportive correctional officers, many more described system involvement as compounding barriers — through stigma, loss of employment opportunities, restrictive supervision conditions, and exposure to criminogenic environments in custody. For some, police and court scrutiny pushed them toward change; for others, it entrenched offending and made desistance harder. There was a desire for change within the system, in terms of both engagement with and the attitudes of justice staff and more meaningful activities that build skills and address underlying issues.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

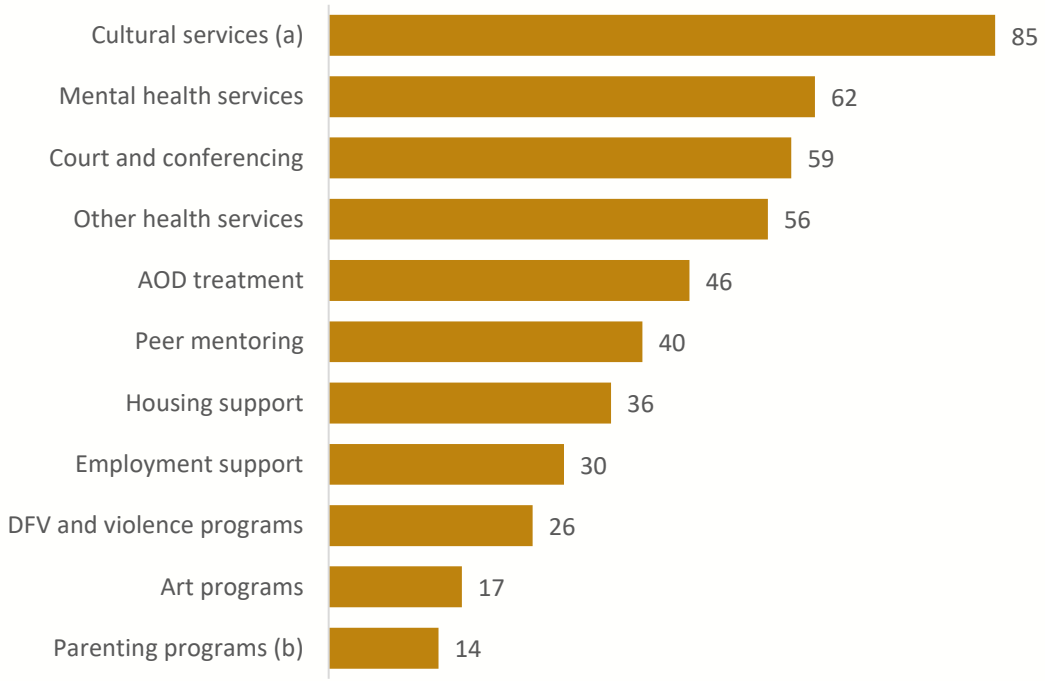
CABINET

4.7 Service engagement

The preceding section focused on participants' interactions with the formal criminal justice system (police, courts, corrections). Research participants were also asked to identify the support services they had engaged with in the past five years and whether these had supported their desistance.

Overall, there was significant level of service engagement, with survey participants engaging with an average of five different services. Most all participants had engaged with some kind of health service, most commonly mental health services (62%, *n* = 64); other health services (56%, *n* = 58) or AOD treatment (46%, *n* = 48). Participation in cultural programs was also common among Indigenous participants (85%, *n* = 45), as were court programs and conferencing (59%, *n* = 61). In comparison, participants were less likely to report engagement in parenting (14%, *n* = 10) and art (17%, *n* = 18) programs (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Service engagement among survey participants (%)



Note: Information missing for 7 participants.

a: Sample limited to Indigenous participants

b: Sample limited to participants with children

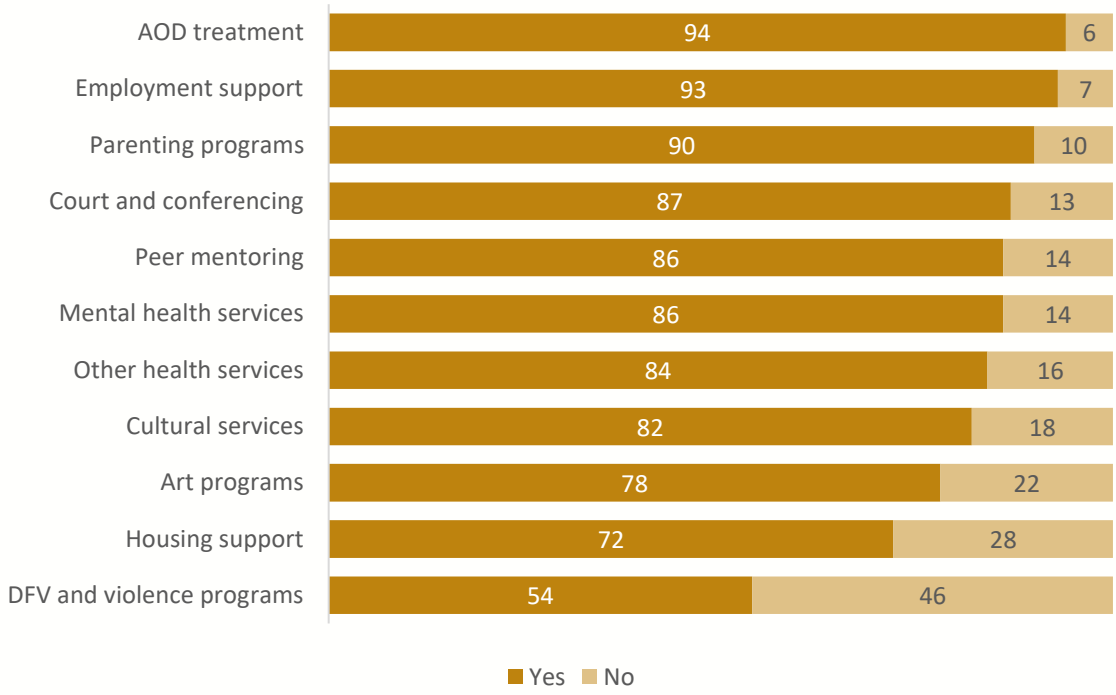
Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Survey participants were also asked whether the services they had engaged with had supported their desistance journeys. Overwhelmingly, they agreed that they had, although this varied between programs and services (Figure 17). Of note is that, despite being one of the least commonly identified services, 90% of parenting program participants agreed that it had supported their desistance journeys. Similarly high rates of endorsement were observed for AOD treatment programs (94%, *n* = 44) and employment support programs (93%, *n* = 28).

CABINET

CABINET

Figure 17: Service engagement among survey participants, by whether they supported desistance (%)



Note: Information missing for 7 participants.

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Interview participants similarly described engaging with multiple services, with a particular focus on mental health supports, AOD treatment, housing and financial services. Some of these participants said that they were involved in several services at one point in time, to try and address the various barriers to their desistance journeys.

One important insight that emerged from the interviews was the need for people to be able to navigate systems in a pro-active and pro-social way. This is of course more possible for people whose needs are not as complex, and so who, paradoxically, may not actually require the support as much. The following comments from James and Dylan illustrate this tension, with both reflecting that their ability to receive the supports that they needed was in part attributable to their ability to communicate their needs effectively, proactively navigate these systems by 'asking the right questions', and to engage with service staff respectfully.

> *The resources [are] available, because they've been presented to me in a nice way, because I'm reaching out responsibly. But if you go: 'it's been three months, I haven't had food, fuck you, fuck this, fuck that' … [service clients] break, they snap, they snap at the services that are trying to provide them the help….a lot of people are getting cut off from something, because they have their breaking points, while using the service. And I've seen it happen. Some people are, like, I can't go back into that building because I did this, and I can't use JHP because I did this, I can't use because I – and they've snapped at the wrong service…Because they didn't know how to reach out, or because the people who were meant to reach out didn't do it*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *effectively. And that happens a lot (James, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*
>
> *I was always asking questions and I could navigate inside of [the service system] a lot easier than the majority of other – of my peers in there. And I had better communication skills and things like that, so that helped me get around things and understand where to ask and where to look and all of that sort of stuff…I had all the supports around my family, had access to technology, and everything I needed. I had anything that anyone needed to get back on their feet. But there's a big list of things that I needed to catch up on, and sort out and do all this sort of stuff. And it kind of felt overwhelming for me, at the start… I got there, but it would be something that – doing what I was doing would be probably impossible for someone with even just slightly higher needs than me… this is a lot for me. I can't imagine someone who, who really needs to rely on these [services] (Dylan, 35-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

James and Dylan's comments also highlight the need for support services to be as accessible as possible, because the alternative (i.e., offending) is familiar, and may seem like an easier alternative:

> *I'm good at headbutting my way out of situations, always have been, so I'm a bit more stubborn than most, but a lot of the boys would have given up by now. Go back to selling drugs and fucking doing cool shit, because it's easy (Liam, 25-44 years, non-Indigenous male).*

This aligns with Halsey et al.'s comments that 'the replacement self is a fragile project in need of constant attention' (Halsey et al., 2017, p. 1057). Another clear theme is that desistance is a long-term undertaking, as these comments demonstrate:

> *I have to do lots of work still, to this day, and I'll continue to do that work, which is, I think, for me, I'm deep rooted in NA. And that's where my people are, and I guess that's where – like, I have a sponsor, and I do step work, and I'm always looking at how I'm living my life, and how I want to do better, and all those kinds of things. And I think that's given me that resilience for when bad stuff might happen (Laura, 45-54 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *It is a long journey…I was on the heroin since I was 14, you know, and just give it up a couple of years ago, so yeah, like, this is all new to me. I'm just trying to take it day by day if I can (Cameron, 35-44 years, Indigenous male).*

This reinforces the need for services to engage long-term, so they can work alongside and support offenders to maintain their desistance, particularly when they encounter situations or factors that could lead to 'relapse' (i.e., a return to offending). Tina and Maia both reflected on the importance of continuity in the relationship with the service provider in facilitating longer-term engagement and trust. The expressed frustration and disappointment when a service

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

provider they had been engaging with left, meaning that they felt like they were back to square one.

> *When you're working with services, not so many different workers, just a one-on-one worker that knows everything, and you don't have to keep explaining your story. Because that's one thing I don't like, because I need to explain my – you know. I don't know. Just one-on-one support, I guess. Because all these different workers, it gets too frustrating (Tina, 25-34 years, Indigenous female).*
>
> *the biggest downfall there is that, the lack of consistency with their staff. So when I was there, three case workers, including my own, left within six weeks… I did three sessions with her, and the third or fourth session, she goes 'I'm actually leaving. And I don't know who's replacing me. I'll let them know'. I haven't heard from them since. That's their downfall. And I think that a lot of services – and I think because they're competing for funding, they can't guarantee the staff jobs…. But I think as a service, like in [XX], there were two women there that I really connected with, [YY] ran the day program, and also was in the house a bit. And then I had my case manager. And just fantastic people, like, they were in the right job, in the right role. And, you know, to see them leave, it was disheartening. But you've got to remember, you've got people like myself, people who are in addiction, people in the justice system, generally don't have that one person, they generally don't have a support network or connections with family, or anything like that. They're used to being tossed out, they're used to having relationships, you know, this vicious cycle, being in different homes, whether it's kids that have gone from foster home to foster home, whether it's someone like myself that, like, I was out of home by the time I was 12, to having relationship after relationship, whatever it is. And now you go into a service where - it's the same thing (Maia, 25-34 years old, non-Indigenous female).*

As Maia noted, this is detrimental to individual progress, but is a by-product of current funding models. In recognition of this issue, the NSW Government has now changed its approach to funding in the community services sector, providing funding for up to five years for key service providers. It is anticipated that this will 'support stability and increased efficiency, helping sector organisations to improve planning, reduce staff shortages and free up resources for service delivery' (2025: np). Funding security is required, to promote the kinds of long-term relationships that our interviewees valued:

> *having [XX] was one of the best services that I found…. I guess they kind of had that approach that, like, 'you know, you can be in touch with us, the door's always open and give us a call, whatever'. [YY] he is a local bloody legend. Just with anything. I've kept in touch with him, whether it's getting the food bank cards and the relief card once a month, or whether it's – you know, I've gone in there and I've gone I need credit for my phone, like, 'can you help me just until I get paid again?'…. I remember crying when I left there… and 'I'm, like, [YY], it never ends. I'm doing everything, but I'm*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *struggling'. And, you know, and he's, like, 'let me help'. And he did (Maia, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous female).*
>
> *[XX] have been - they are the reason that I kept going... I've only been involved with them for about two years, but they have been the best, the best. There are peer workers there. And to see how far some of the people that work there have come, like, gives me the hope that I can get somewhere with it. Like, they've been – they've been my life savers (Lucy, 45-54 years, non-Indigenous female).*

Lucy's comments about peer workers align with the discussion in earlier sections (4.1.3 and 4.4.1) which highlighted the importance of lived experience among service providers working with people involved in the criminal justice system. This was reinforced by James who said:

> *If someone with a textbook, or someone who's, oh, 'I've studied this for 30 years', [goes] to tell me what to do, regardless of the race or colour – that's a big thing – but regardless of that, they're going to go 'you don't know what you're talking about, so fuck you.' So, if the resources that are available to people like me, and they say 'it's not us saying it, it's people who've been in your situation saying it', they will take that information on - not easier, but they will take it on with less argument, or, you know, pushback (James, 25-34 years, non-Indigenous male).*

More broadly, the importance of having a positive therapeutic relationship with service providers, based on mutual understanding and respect, was a common theme. Lucy for example, described a support worker who she said had been 'amazing' and 'fought tooth and nail' for her to get the services she needed.

The need for and benefits of holistic service provision in a supportive environment also comes across clearly from the following discussion between focus group participants who were engaged with Yeddung Murra. They described the service in positive terms, because they were able to offer clients a range of services that could make their lives easier, and support their desistance journeys.

> *Bill: Like, just learning how to use a phone properly. You know what I mean, and how to put bank accounts into your phone, and how to, you know, give email addresses, and do little things like that. Like, when I've got a phone, I just answer it. That was the best I could do. But when they teach you to, you know, you get the bank, you get all these other apps, bus apps and, you know, little helpful little things like that. Make the day easier. When you've got an easier day for yourself, you're not, like, up there in the clouds, and wanting to do silly things, you know?... There's that opportunities where, you know, if you haven't got yourself on your feet and that, you can ask – well, I've got no white cards, I'm looking for a job, you know. And when opportunity comes along, [unclear]. White card is coming around soon, put your name down on a piece of paper and get it. Within a couple of weeks, you might have a job.*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

> *Kian: Yeah, the health card. Talking about forklift licence…*
>
> *Bill: Yeah, and… setting up with Centrelink…*
>
> *Matty: It just makes it easy. Doctor appointments…*
>
> *Cameron: They help you out, like, you know, goals…like they help you out with goals, and move you, like, you know, moving in the right direction to get to achieve them goals. And, yeah, it's good, yeah. Very supportive….*
>
> *Matty: Like, if it wasn't for Yeddung Murra, we'd pretty much be all fucked, I think.*
>
> *Cameron: It helps us a lot.*
>
> *Tina: Yeah, not just with programs, just like with everything.*
>
> *Cameron: Even going to church and everything…*
>
> *Matty: Yeah, we talk about [cultural stuff]…You can't ask too much of them…We do that here anyway, listening to Elders. Catch some good yarns.*

Again, these findings align closely with broader research. For example, Sotiri et al. (2021) undertook an evaluation on behalf of NSW Health of the support provided by the Community Restorative Centre (CRC) to people leaving custody or at risk of incarceration. Their interrupted time series analysis indicated that CRC intervention was associated with a 66% reduction in the number of days in custody, while the number of new custody episodes and proven offences fell by 63% and 62% respectively. A comparison analysis found that the CRC's programs, including criminal justice system savings of up to $16 million over three years, for an intake of 275 new clients. Importantly, for the purposes of this report, the elements that were seen as critical to CRC's success were

> *the need to understand the **practical and relational kinds of support people require within the context of structural and systemic disadvantage**. It found that incarceration disadvantage is itself located in the context of a lifetime of other kinds of disadvantage; that **meeting basic welfare, housing, health and support needs is fundamental to building a life outside of the prison system**, and that the way in which support is provided (**flexible, outreach, relational, long-term**) and the manner in which people who have experienced incarceration and disadvantage are treated by workers (**respectful, non-judgemental, compassionate, consistent**) is a fundamental factor in achieving change in a range of areas, including breaking cycles of recidivism and alcohol and other drug use (2021: 4; emphasis in original).*

Key finding

Participants engaged with a wide range of services, most commonly health, cultural, and court/conferencing programs. While most agreed that these services supported their

CABINET

CABINET

desistance, the perceived impact varied between programs. Less common services, such as art, parenting, and employment supports were rated particularly highly. Interviews point to factors such as continuity, respect, and lived experience understanding as key needs in service delivery models.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

5. The power of combinations

So far, the catalysts for and barriers to change have been presented as separate and distinct factors. However, as various quotes from participants throughout this report have demonstrated, many described various co-occurring and intersecting factors, that were at times also in opposition with each other, and impacted their desistance journeys in important ways. In this section, we describe the overlap between various factors, identifying common 'combinations'.

For this stage of the analysis, we have combined the catalysts for and barriers to change into high-level categories (15 and 9 domains respectively), which are described in Table 5.

Table 5: Catalysts for and barriers to change domains

	Catalyst		Barrier	
Domain	n	%	n	%
Children[a]	71	99		
Family	103	93	43	38
Friends	100	90	51	46
Maturation	97	87		
Intimate partner[b]	84	81	40	38
Feared selves	85	77	30	27
Community	83	75	40	36
Criminal justice system sanctions	75	68	25	23
Alcohol and drug addiction	66	59	51	46
Mental health	60	54		
Employment	60	54	59	53
Self-efficacy	66	59	52	47
Alternative futures	37	33		
Housing	28	25		
Education	10	9		

a: Sample limited to participants who said they had children

b: Sample limited to participants who said they had ever been in a relationship. Sample excludes 1 participant who did not provide this information.

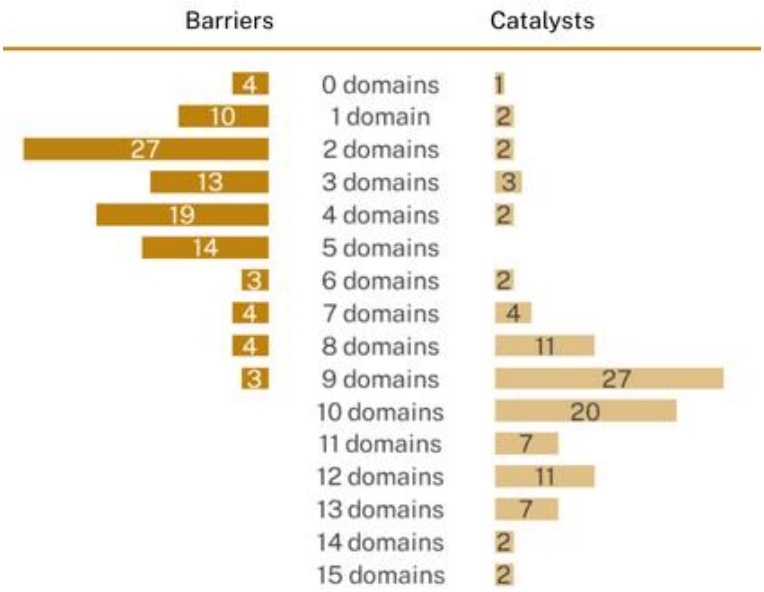
Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

As shown in Figure 18, almost all participants selected catalysts for change in multiple domains, with 75% (n = 84) endorsing nine or more. Similarly, the majority of participants selected multiple barriers to change, with almost half (46%, n = 52) endorsing four or more.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Figure 18: Number of catalysts and barriers for change selected by participants



Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

5.1 Co-occurrence of catalysts for change

We used a correlation matrix to identify which domains of change 'co-occurred' for participants. These results were visualised in a heat map (Figure A1). Lighter colours indicate stronger associations between two factors (i.e., they often co-occur in participants' desistance journeys), while darker colours indicate weaker associations.

However, while heat maps are analytically valuable for identifying these patterns, they are not always intuitive or easy to interpret for all audiences. The subtle colour gradients and matrix format can make it difficult to see the practical implications of the clustering, particularly for policy and practice stakeholders, who are less focussed on statistical visualisation.

To support clearer communication of these findings, we therefore present the co-occurrence patterns using simple bar graphs. These charts highlight the frequency with which key factors co-occurred, providing a more accessible representation of the same underlying analysis, while retaining the nuance of domain-level clustering.

5.1.1 Maturation

Maturation emerged from this analysis as a central catalyst for change, co-occurring with:

- children ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$),
- family ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$),
- friends ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$),
- intimate partners ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$),
- employment ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$),
- community ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$),
- AOD ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$), and

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

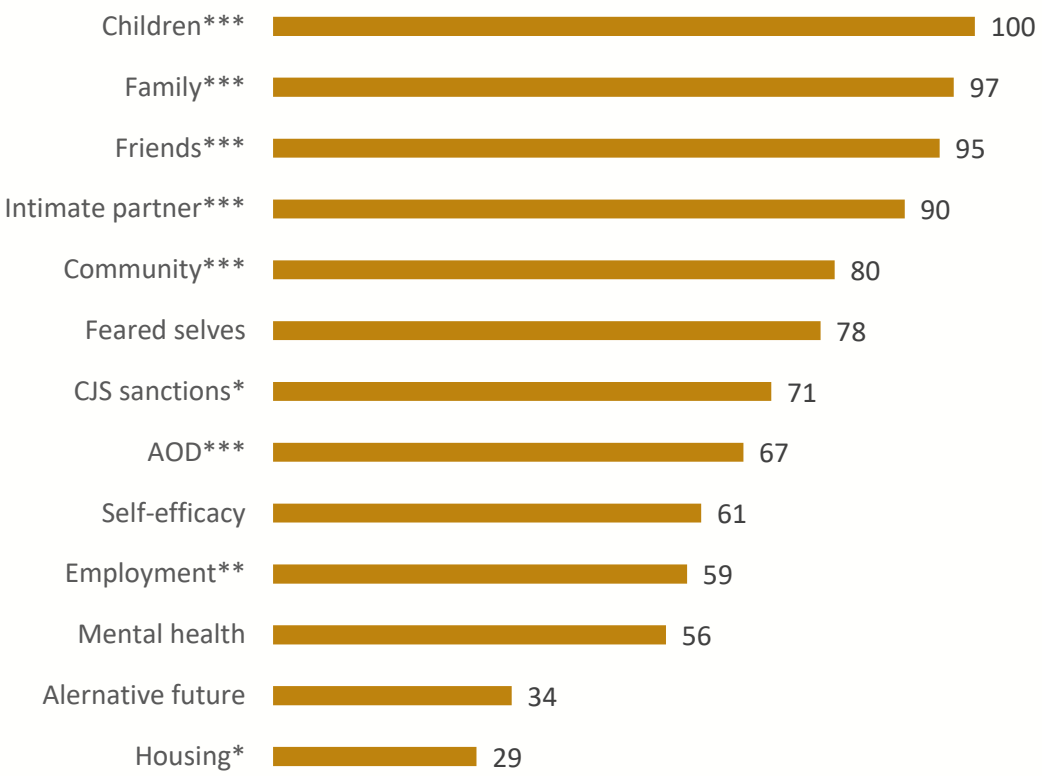
CABINET

- criminal justice system sanctions ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$)

Interestingly, stable housing showed a negative association with maturation, as a catalyst for change ($r = -0.20$, $p < 0.05$).

What this suggests is that becoming 'tired' of offending and getting older may function as a key turning point for individuals that increases their motivation to stop offending or maintain their desistance.

Figure 19: Co-occurrence of catalysts: community domain (%)



Note: Sample limited to participants who selected community as a catalyst for change. CJS = criminal justice system. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Because the survey is cross-sectional, the relationship between maturation and other catalysts may run in two directions. First, it may be that other catalysts occur first – such as the birth of children, which in turn leads to maturation processes. These commitments can create new constraints and responsibilities, making offending less feasible and increasing investment in pro-social identities (Warr, 1998). Further, Rocque (2015) identified that AOD use has a negative impact on maturation processes, meaning that treatment and reduction in AOD use could promote maturation. Alternatively, it could be that maturation processes contribute to individuals proactively seeking out 'hooks for change' (Giordano et al., 2002) such as applying for jobs, engaging in AOD treatment and starting a relationship with someone who is not involved in offending. If someone is already tired of offending, then they may be more receptive to these proffered hooks for change and embrace them when they present themselves (Giordano et al., 2002).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Rocque's conceptualisation of maturation as a multi-dimensional process provides a useful framework for interpreting these findings (Rocque, 2015). He argues that maturation involves overlapping social, civic, psychosocial and cognitive domains. Social-role maturation encompasses stable adult relationships, independence, completion of education and consistent employment — what he refers to as the "respectability package". These milestones are not necessarily causal drivers of desistance but rather part of the same broader process of becoming an adult, accompanied by social expectations about responsible behaviour. Civic maturation reflects individuals' sense of belonging and reciprocity within the community, expressed through actions such as voting, volunteering, paying taxes and contributing to collective wellbeing. Psychosocial and identity maturation include the development of self-control, emotional regulation and pro-social self-concepts, while cognitive and neurological maturation capture the brain-based changes in reasoning and impulse control that underpin socially acceptable behaviour.

Viewed through this lens, the strong correlations between maturation and other catalysts make conceptual sense. Desistance rarely follows a single trajectory; it arises through the convergence of internal change and external opportunity. As people mature across these multiple domains — social, civic, psychosocial and cognitive — they accumulate the resources, roles and expectations that make continued offending less compatible with their emerging sense of self and place in the community.

5.1.2 Community

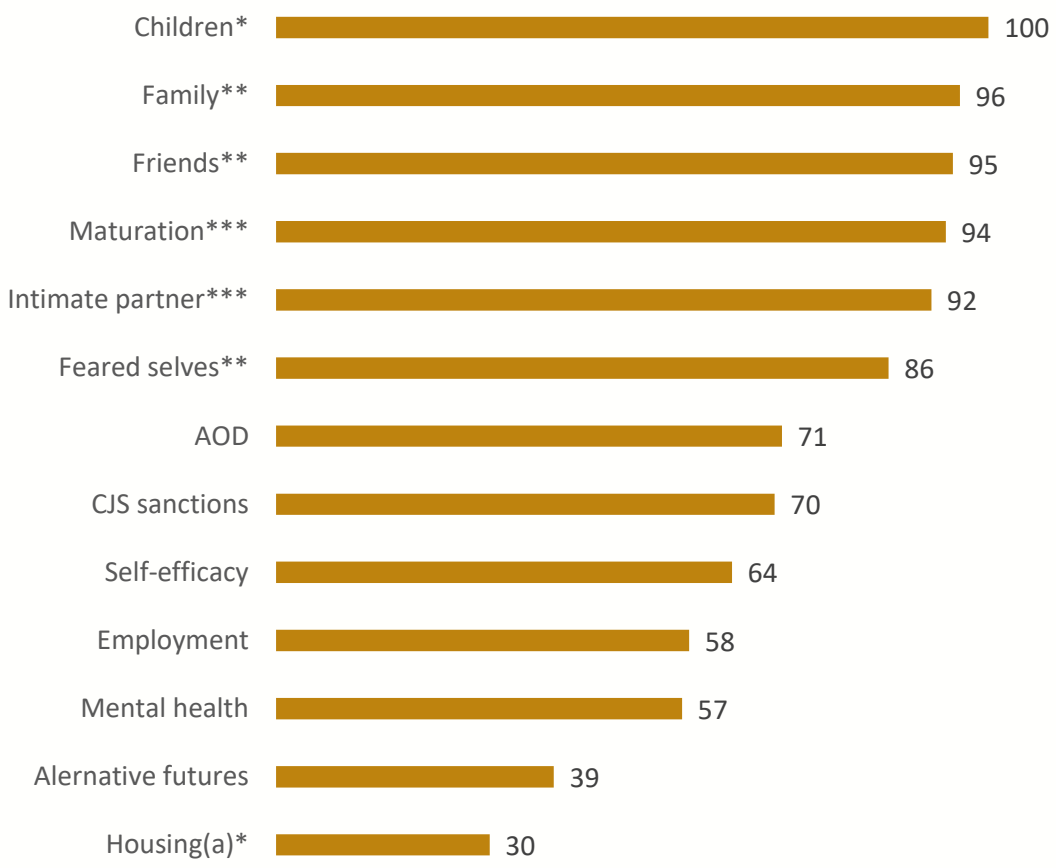
Community was also correlated with a number of other catalysts for change:

- maturation ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$),
- feared selves ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$),
- children ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$),
- family ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$),
- friends ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$),
- intimate partners ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), and
- housing ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Figure 20: Co-occurrence of catalysts: community domain (%)



Note: Sample limited to participants who selected community as a catalyst for change. CJS = criminal justice system. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

a: The correlation reflects whether housing co-occurs with community more than expected by chance across the whole sample. The co-occurrence percentage reflects only how many people in the "community" subgroup selected housing. Housing was selected by relatively few people overall, so a 39% co-occurrence actually represents a strong statistical association.

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

The centrality of community connections could be explained through the concept of generativity. As discussed in 2.1.4, this is where individuals view giving back to the community and using their experiences to help others, as a vehicle for repairing the perceived harm their offending has caused. Potentially, this desire to 'give back' may be more important in situations where the individual's connection to family members and friends is a barrier to desistance or when they are absent entirely. For example, Laura observed that her social work filled a hole caused by her estrangement from her children, which she attributed to her use of drugs and offending during their childhood.

Generativity and 'giving back' are not only catalysts for initiating but also sustaining desistance. Research suggests that individuals who integrate their offending into their life narratives and reframe it as a resource for helping others — the so-called 'wounded healer' trope — maintain stronger motivation to desist (Heidemann et al., 2016; LeBel et al., 2015). As LeBel et al., noted: 'it may be more reintegrative to give help than to receive it' (2015, p. 109).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

LeBel et al., also argued that individuals who are able to make meaning from their experiences and give back to the community appear to have more hope for the future, which can in turn motivate desistance.

> *"the professional [desisting offender] appear to have undergone a remarkable change in their self-identities and worldviews. This change—best understood as "hope"—may be a product of personal redemption and second mile [i.e., going above and beyond] efforts to make amends for one's actions by helping others, and appears to be related to desistance from crime" (2015, p. 116).*

These insights have led some scholars to argue that people in the process of desistance should be recognised as experts by experience and supported to take on generative roles — in prisons, parole, and broader community contexts (Heidemann et al., 2016; Maruna & Ramsden, 2004; Woods, 2020).

5.1.3 Substance use

Alcohol and drug use also emerged as a central domain, intersecting with:

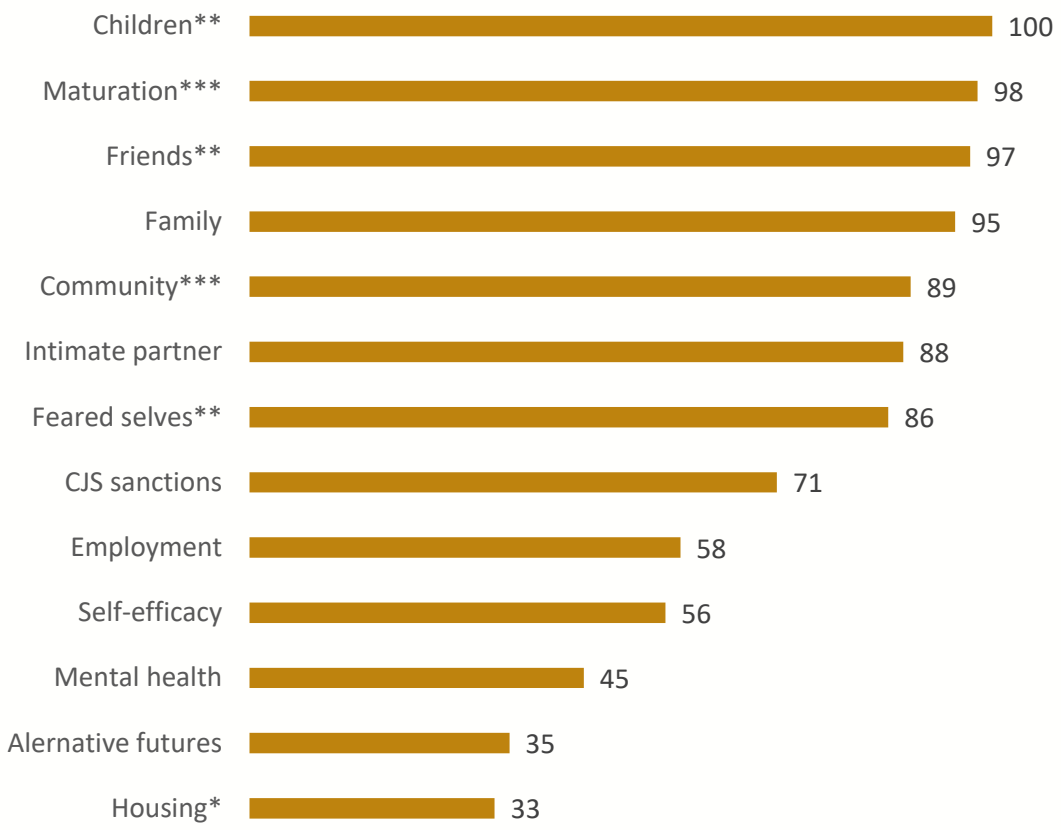
- feared selves ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$),
- maturation ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$),
- children ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$),
- friends ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$),
- housing ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$), and
- community (0.19, $p < 0.05$).

This suggests that AOD use impacts multiple areas of participants' lives and can shape their capacity to desist. For some, reducing or stopping substance use may act as a gateway to clarifying priorities, strengthening relationships, and planning for the future. For others, commitments - such as having children or the process of getting older - may have created the motivation to reduce AOD use. In this way, AOD functions both as a barrier to desistance and as a catalyst for change when addressed, with the potential to generate ripple effects across many other life domains.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Figure 21: Catalyst co-occurrence of catalysts: AOD domain (%)



Note: Sample limited to participants who selected AO as a catalyst for change. CJS = criminal justice system. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

5.2 Co-occurrence of barriers to change

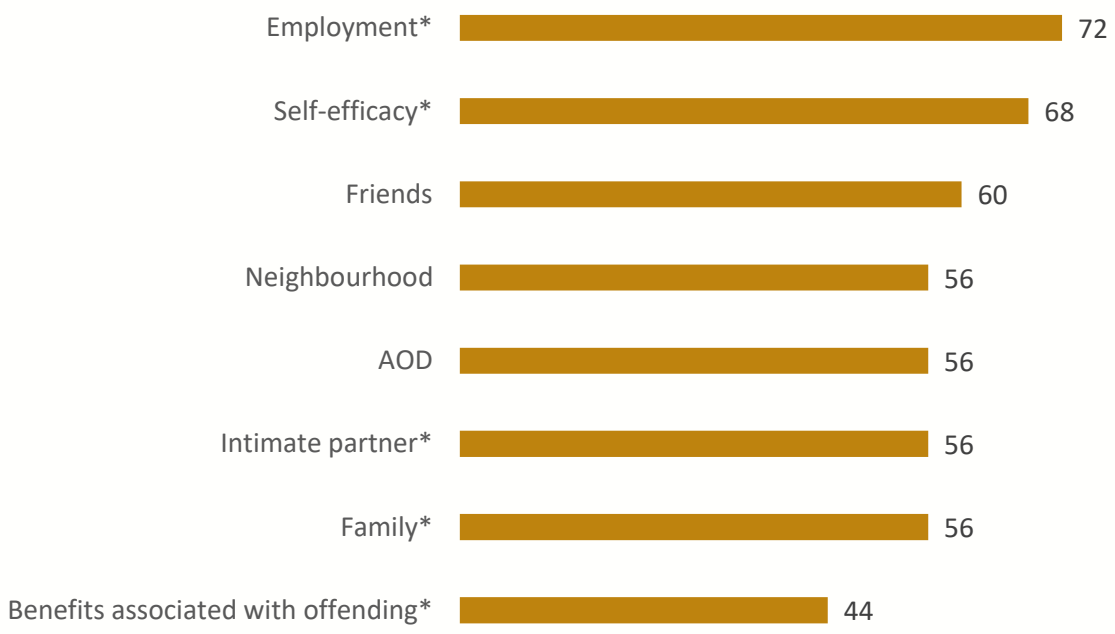
There were also areas of overlap between barriers to desistance identified by participants (see Figure 20). Belief that the police would not leave them alone (criminal justice system sanctions) was correlated with a number of other barriers to change:

- low levels of self-efficacy ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$),
- benefits associated with offending ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$),
- pressure/lack of support from family ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$),
- pressure/lack of support from partner ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$) and
- unemployment/financial insecurity ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Figure 22: Co-occurrence of barriers: criminal justice system sanctions domain (%)



Note: Sample limited to participants who selected criminal justice system sanctions as a barrier for change. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

The centrality of police attention to barriers to desistance may be explained through different mechanisms. For example, its correlation with family relationships could reflect the influence of family offending on police scrutiny. Participants who said police scrutiny was a barrier to desistance were more likely to have multiple family members and partners (2 or more) who had previously been proceeded against by the police (56%, $n = 14$ vs 28%, $n = 24$, $X^2(2) = 7.23$, $p < 0.05$). Research on the intergenerational transmission of offending highlights that criminal justice system bias can amplify scrutiny of families known for offending (Besemer et al., 2013, 2017). As such, it may not be that the police have a primary focus on the individual, but familial units.

The overlap between criminal justice system sanctions and unemployment/financial security likely reflects the way police attention impacts individuals' ability to gain and sustain meaningful employment. This is supported by both Australian (Graffam et al., 2004) and international (Agan & Starr, 2017; Visher et al., 2005) research. This may be due to the stigma associated with having a criminal record, which may have to be disclosed as part of the application process, as well as the impact of conditions on parole and other orders which can be disruptive and in turn impact employment (e.g., having to attend parole meetings during work hours – see 4.6 for more of a discussion of this).

Finally, the correlation between police scrutiny and low self-efficacy is also supported by broader research, which has found that interaction with the justice system can have a stigmatising effect; and thereby close off opportunities for engagement in pro-social activities and for hooks for change (Besemer et al., 2017). This can have the perverse effect of impacting

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

individuals' perceived ability to stop offending. The stigmatising effect of the criminal justice system was described by participants in 4.6.

Key finding

Desistance was rarely driven by a single factor: most participants endorsed multiple, intersecting catalysts and barriers. Maturation emerged as a central catalyst, co-occurring with family, partners, children, community, employment, and reduced AOD use—suggesting that "getting tired" of offending often coincided with, or made people more receptive to, hooks for change in other domains. Community connections also played a generative role, with participants describing a desire to "give back" as a way of repairing harm and sustaining change. Conversely, police scrutiny frequently overlapped with barriers such as low self-efficacy, family conflict, and employment challenges, underscoring how systemic factors can compound personal obstacles to desistance.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

6. Desistance pathways by gender and Indigeneity

In this section, we examine differences in the catalysts for and barriers to change on the basis of gender (male and female participants) and Indigenous status (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous participants). We also describe differences in service engagement across these groups. To test whether the observed differences were statistically significant, we used chi-square tests of association. Statistical significance is typically set at 5%, but given the exploratory nature of this study, we adopted a more flexible threshold of 10%. In practice, this means we report on differences, where the likelihood of the result being due to chance was less than one in ten.

6.1 Gender

6.1.1 Catalysts and barriers for change

Overall, the catalysts for (Figure 21) and barriers to change (Figure 22) selected by participants was comparable across male and female survey participants. However, there were a small number of differences which were noteworthy:

- *Self-efficacy:* Females were less likely to identify self-efficacy as a catalyst for change than males (48%, n = 19 vs 67%, n = 40; $X^2(1) = 3.64$, $p < 0.056$), although there were no differences in endorsement of low levels of self-efficacy as a barrier to change (48%, n = 19 vs 47%, n = 28).
- *Family relationships:* A larger proportion of females said that their family members were a barrier to desistance compared to males (50%, n = 20 vs 32%, n = 32; $X^2(1) = 3.39$, $p = 0.066$). However, there was no difference in family members being identified as a catalyst for change (98%, n = 39 vs 90%, n = 93).
- *Criminal justice system sanctions:* A smaller proportion of female participants said that they were motivated to change because of their contact with the criminal justice system than males (58%, n = 23 vs 78%, n = 47; $X^2(1) = 4.96$, $p < 0.05$). Although a smaller proportion also said that criminal justice systems sanctions were a barrier to desistance (18% vs 29%), this difference was not statistically significant.

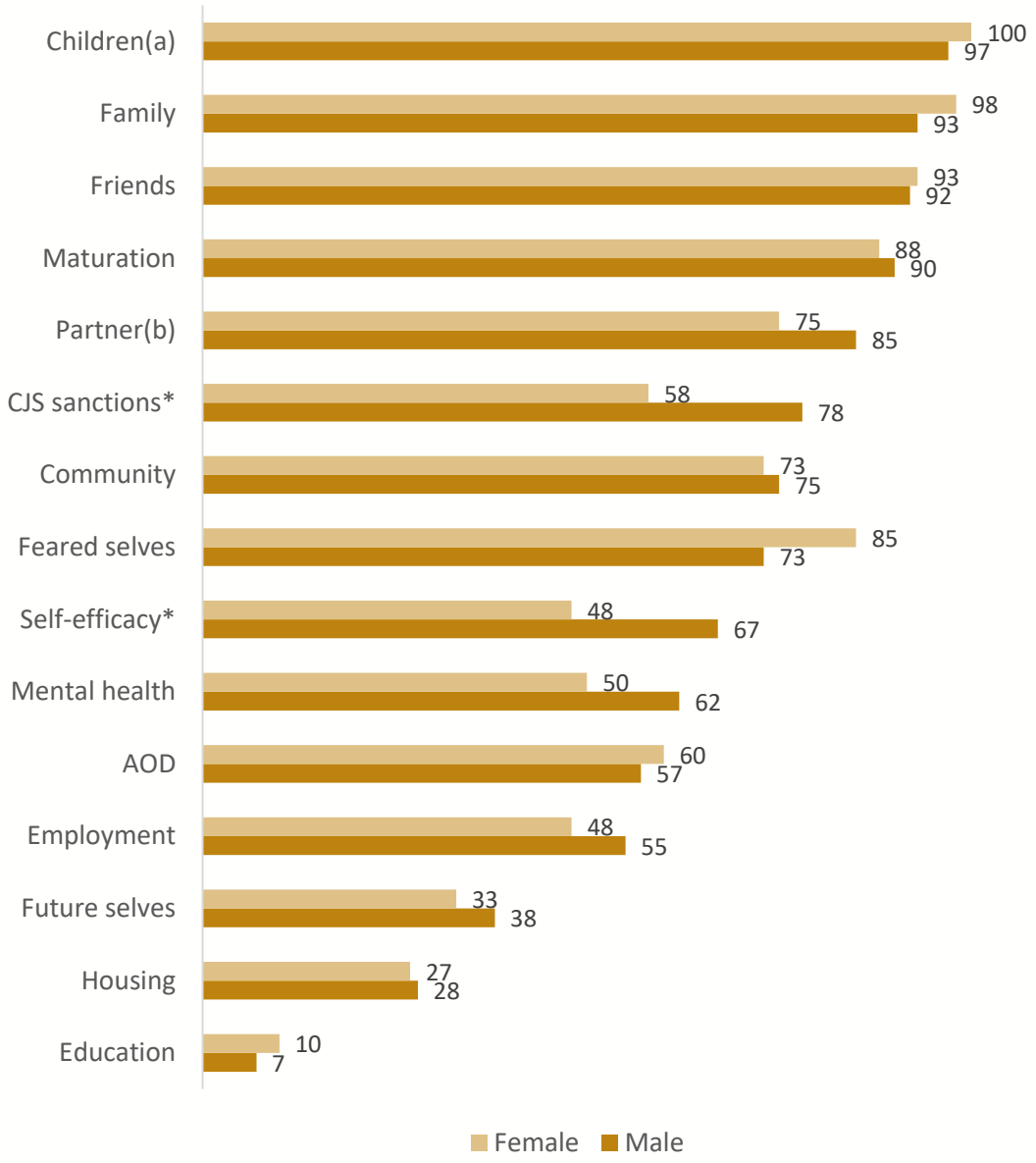
Although not statistically significant, other differences in the catalysts for change were also observable between men and women. A smaller proportion of women than men said that their intimate partner (75%, n = 30 vs 85%, n = 46) and/or getting support for their mental health issues (50%, n = 20 vs 62%, n = 37) was a catalyst for change. Conversely, a larger proportion said that the evocation of feared selves was a catalyst for change (85%, n = 34 vs 73%, n = 44).

The fact that women were less likely to identify self-efficacy as a catalyst for change could be explained by the differences in the offending patterns and trajectories of men and women. Women, overall, are less likely to engage in offending. In fact, the most recent data indicate that the offending rate for women in the ACT was 266 per 100,000 people aged 10 or over, compared with 972 for men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Their pathways into crime can also look different to men's (Smith et al., 2025). In particular, abusive relationships can act as an entry point into the justice system (Bartels et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2025) and involvement typically occurs later. This was certainly the case for several of the women we interviewed.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

Because women have different offending patterns, their perceived self-efficacy to stop offending – because it is not viewed as an intrinsic part of their lives – could be generally higher than men to begin with. This could therefore explain why women were less likely to select this as a catalyst for change. As Petrillo has highlighted, however, 'the intersections of gender, race, and class disadvantage faced by desisting women … can pose [restrictions] to the exercise of agency' (2023, p. 69).

Figure 23: Catalysts for change identified by survey participants, by gender (%)



Note: CJS = criminal justice system. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$, ****$p < 0.001$

a: Sample limited to participants who had children

b: Sample limited to participants who had ever been in a relationship

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

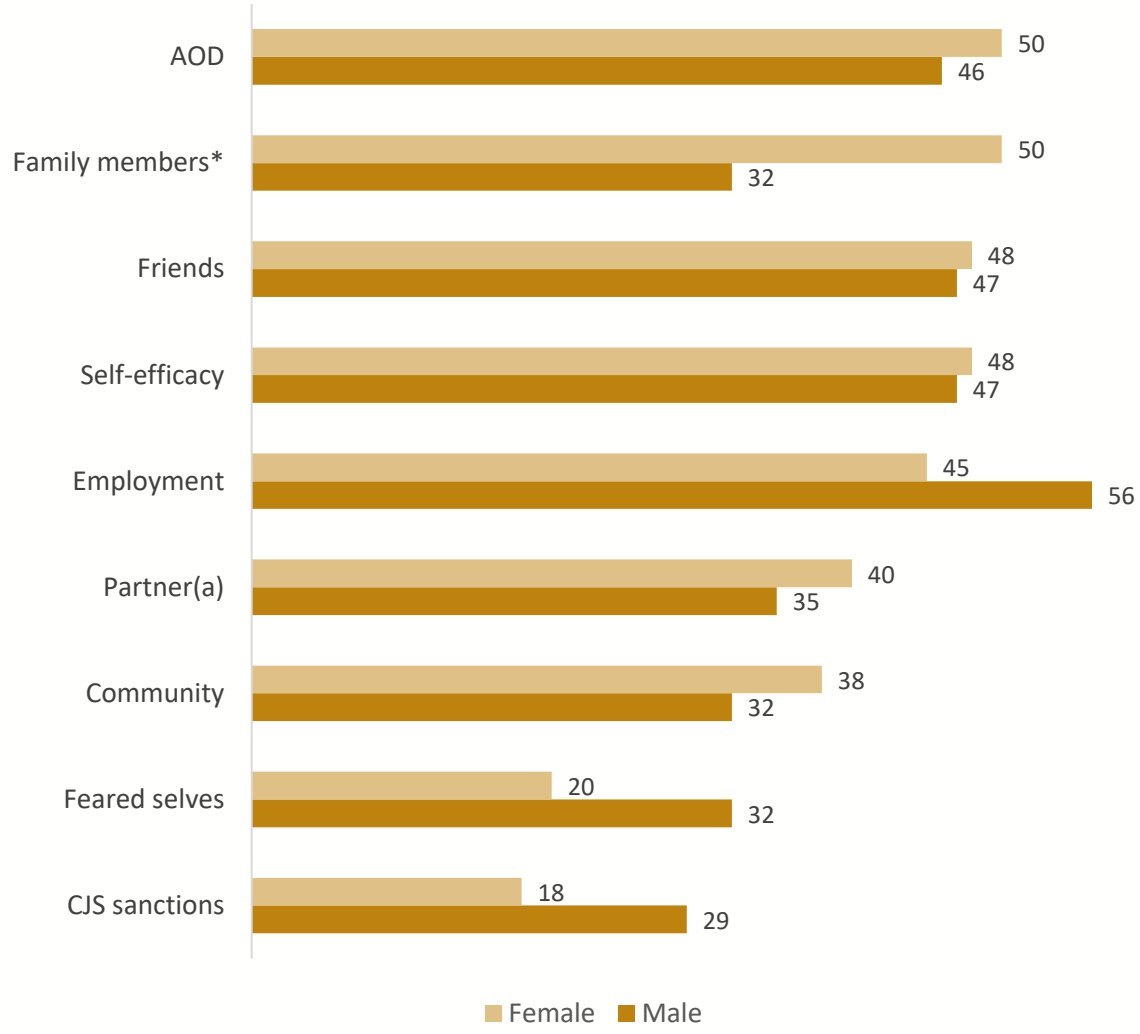
The only other difference in barriers to change observed for men and women was, again feared selves. A smaller proportion of women had experienced barriers to evoking feared

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

selves associated with their offending, because of the benefits that they derived from these behaviours (20%, *n* = 8 vs 32%, *n* = 19). However, this difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 24: Barriers for change identified by survey participants, by gender (%)



Note: CJS = criminal justice system. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$, ****$p < 0.001$

a: Sample limited to participants who had ever been in a relationship

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

6.1.2 Service engagement

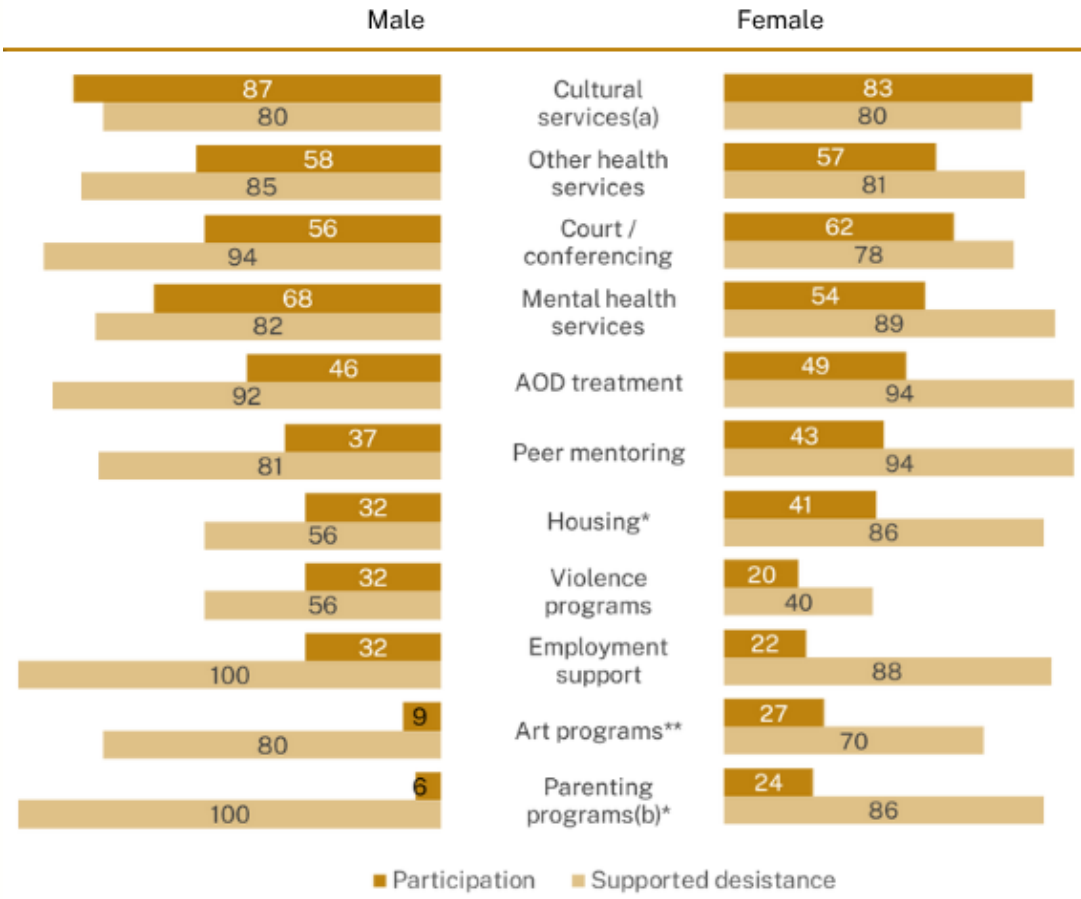
As shown in Figure 23, the service engagement patterns of men and women was broadly comparable, as were their assessments of whether these services had supported their desistance journeys. For both men and women, the most common services they had engaged with in the past five years were cultural services (limited to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants; 87%, *n* = 20 vs 83%, *n* = 20), other health services (58%, *n* = 33 vs 57%, *n* = 21), and court/conferencing programs (56%, *n* = 32 vs 62%, *n* = 23). The only notable difference in service engagement patterns was that women were more likely than men to take part in art programs (27%, *n* = 10 vs 9%, *n* = 5; Fischer's exact = 0.023).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Endorsement that service engagement supported desistance was also comparable across men and women, with high levels of endorsement overall. This said, just over half of the men who received housing support (56%, *n* = 10) agreed that it had helped support desistance, compared with 86% of women (*n* = 12). However, this difference was not statistically significant, likely because of small numbers.

Figure 25: Service engagement in past five years and whether supported desistance, by gender (%)



*$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$, ****$p < 0.001$

a: Sample limited to Indigenous participants

b: Sample limited to participants who had children

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Key finding

Overall, men and women reported broadly similar catalysts for and barriers to change, but some gendered differences were evident. Women were less likely than men to cite self-efficacy or justice system contact as catalysts and more likely to view family members as barriers to desistance. Differences also emerged in how feared selves and intimate partners featured in women's narratives. These patterns likely reflect women's distinct pathways

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

into offending, which are often shaped by coercive relationships and later-life system involvement, compared with men's more entrenched trajectories.

6.2 Indigenous status

6.2.1 Catalysts and barriers for change

There were significant differences in the catalysts for (Figure 24) and barriers to change (Figure 25) between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous participants. Compared to non-Indigenous participants, Indigenous participants were more likely to select the following as catalysts for change:

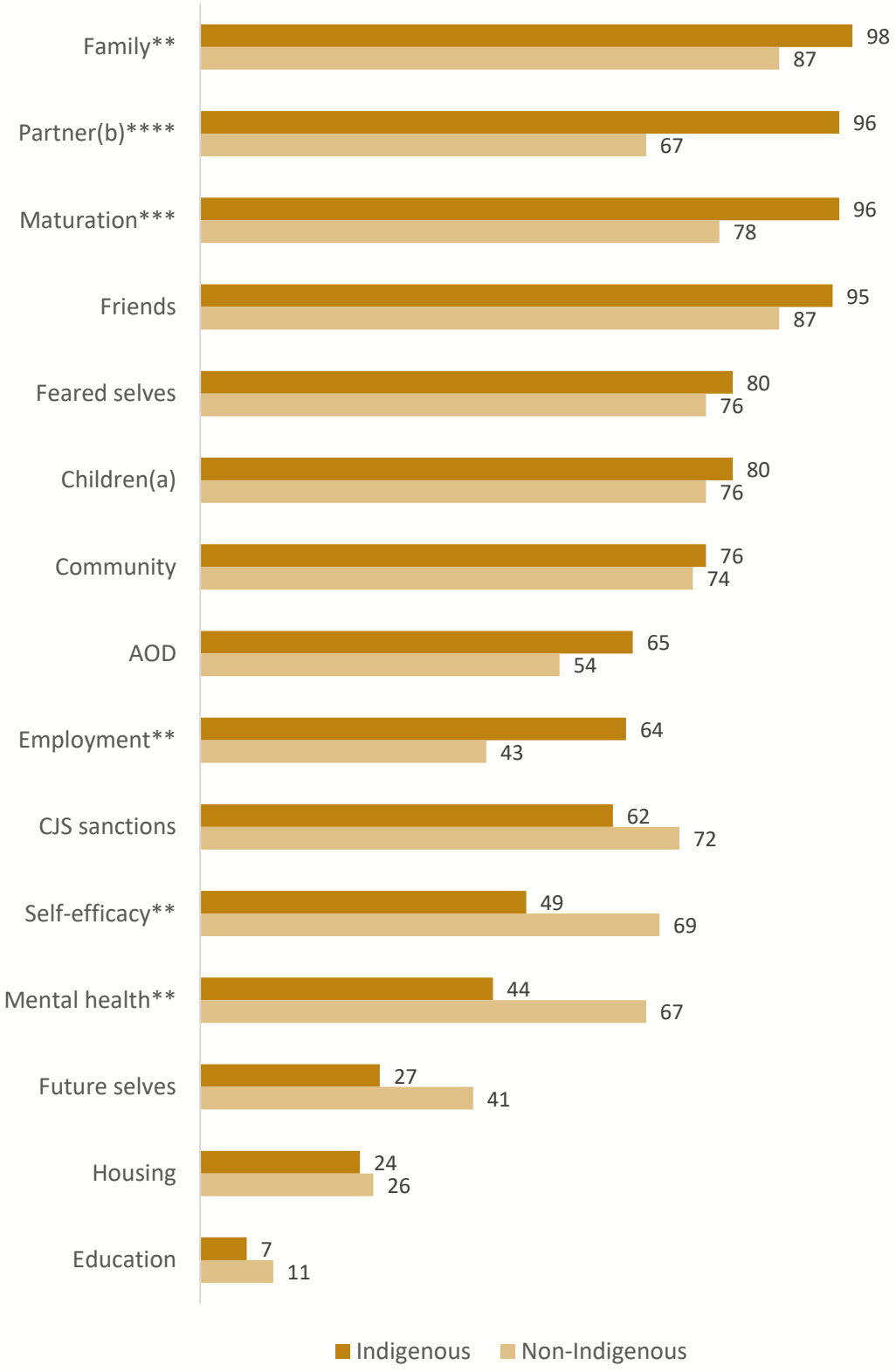
- *Family relationships*: 98% (n = 54) vs 87% (n = 47) (Fischer's exact = 0.032). However, there was no difference between these two groups and the identification of family relationships as a barrier to change.
- *Maturation:* 96% (n = 53) vs 78% (n = 42; $X^2(1) = 8.41$, $p < 0.01$).
- *Intimate partner:* 96% (n = 49) vs 67% (n = 34; Fischer's exact = 0.000). However, there was no difference, in terms of how these two groups perceived intimate partner relationships as a barrier to change.
- *Employment*: 64% (n = 35) vs 43% (n = 23; $X^2(1) = 4.85$, $p < 0.05$). Although a smaller proportion of Indigenous participants identified employment as a barrier to desistance (50%, n = 27 vs 58%, n = 32), this difference was not statistically significant.

Indigenous participants were also less likely to select some catalysts for change, compared to non-Indigenous participants. While self-efficacy (i.e., the belief in the ability to change) was identified as a catalyst for change by 69% (n = 37) of non-Indigenous participants, this decreased to 49% for Indigenous participants and this difference was statistically significant ($X^2(1) = 4.24$, $p < 0.05$). Meanwhile, 67% (n = 36) of non-Indigenous participants said that getting support for their mental health was a catalyst for change, compared to 44% (n = 24) of Indigenous participants ($X^2(1) = 5.84$, $p < 0.05$).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Figure 26: Catalysts for change identified by survey participants, by Indigenous status (%)



Note: CJS = criminal justice system. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$, ****$p < 0.001$. Sample excludes 2 participants who did not provide or did not know their Indigenous status.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

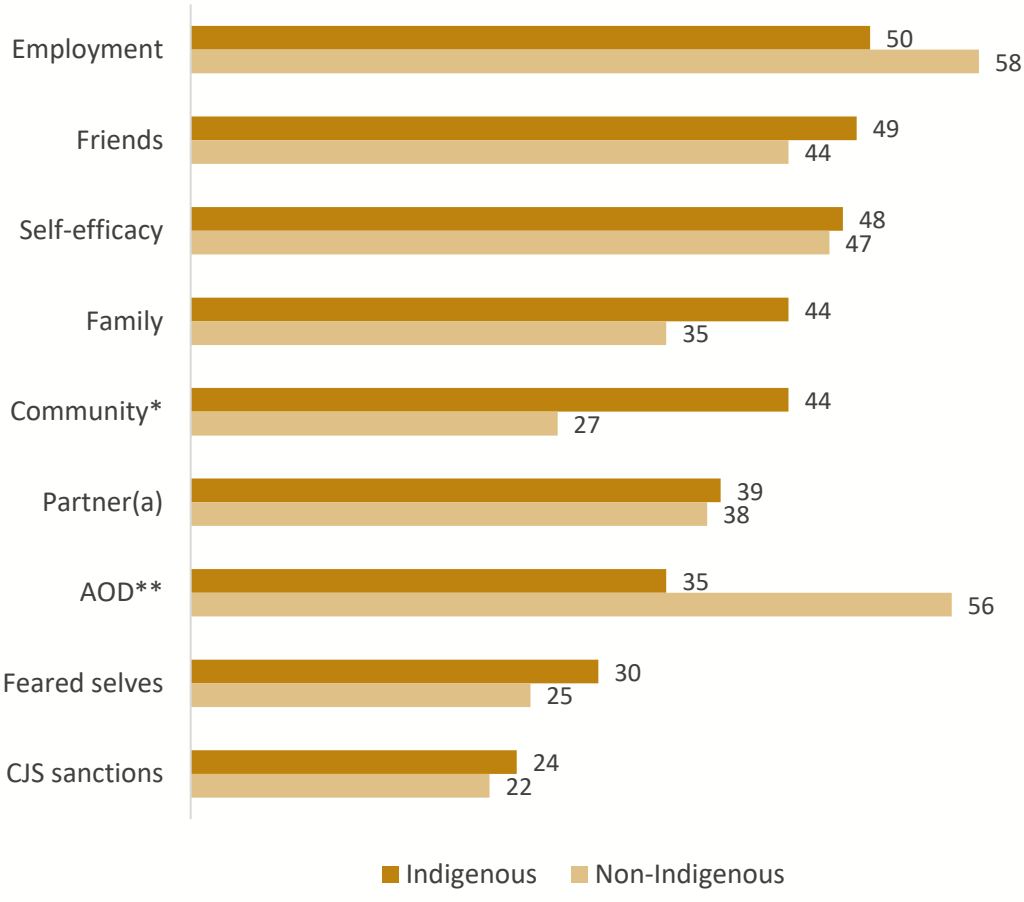
a: Sample limited to participants who had children

b: Sample limited to participants who had ever been in a relationship

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

Overall, the barriers to change identified by non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants were comparable. However, two key differences emerged. First, Indigenous participants were more likely to identify their community as a barrier to change. In this context, community was defined as living in an area, where crime is common (44%, $n = 24$ vs 27%, $n = 15$; $X^2(1) = 3.50$, $p = 0.061$). Conversely, Indigenous participants were less likely to identify their use of alcohol and drugs as a barrier to desistance (35%, $n = 19$ vs 56%, $n = 31$ $X^2(1) = 4.92$, $p < 0.05$). The implications of these findings are worth considering further. As discussed in section 2.3, Farrall et al. (2025) found recently that the limited research on ethnicity and desistance points to delayed or altered desistance processes, in economically stressed communities and, in particular, where there is widespread criminal involvement in a community, desistance may require someone to isolate themselves from that community. Comprehensive responses are therefore required that support and uplift whole communities, rather than simply expecting individuals to disengage from their networks. In relation to the second point, this may link back to the comments above in relation to the overlap between AOD issues and mental health.

Figure 27: Barriers for change identified by survey participants, by Indigenous status (%)



Note: CJS = criminal justice system. *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$, ****$p < 0.001$

Note: Sample excludes 2 participants who did not provide or did not know their Indigenous status.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

a: Sample limited to participants who had ever been in a relationship

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

6.2.2 Service engagement

As shown in Figure 26, service engagement patterns differed significantly between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. In the past five years, Indigenous participants were more likely than non-Indigenous participants to have engaged with:

- court/conferencing programs (85%, $n = 45$ vs 32%, $n = 16$; $X^2(1) = 29.82$, $p < 0.001$),
- other health services (68%, $n = 36$ vs 44%, $n = 22$; $X^2(1) = 5.99$, $p < 0.05$), and
- art programs (28%, $n = 15$ vs 6%, $n = 3$; Fischer's Exact = 0.004).

This higher level of engagement may be due to the presence of Indigenous-specific services in the ACT, which non-Indigenous participants would not have been eligible for (e.g., the Galambany Circle Sentencing Court).

By contrast, Indigenous participants were less likely than non-Indigenous participants to have engaged with:

- AOD treatment programs (34%, $n = 18$ vs 60%, $n = 30$; $X^2(1) = 7.01$, $p < 0.01$), and
- mental health services (53%, $n = 28$ vs 70%, $n = 35$; $X^2(1) = 3.19$, $p = 0.074$).

This may reflect measurement issues, as some participants reported engaging with holistic Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) like Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Service (Winnunga), without distinguishing between individual service streams. Alternatively, the lower engagement may also signal barriers, such as financial constraints, language, and perceptions that mainstream services are not culturally safe or relevant.

The importance of cultural safety was evident in Indigenous participants' evaluations of the role of services in their desistance journeys. These findings should be read in conjunction with the extensive research recently undertaken by Cunneen et al. (2025), which identified 'systemic racism and lack of cultural safety across different parts of government as significant drivers' of the over-representation of Indigenous people in the ACT criminal justice system (2025: 57).

Indigenous-specific services received the highest levels of endorsement: 95% of Indigenous participants who mentioned the Galambany Circle Sentencing Court ($n = 18$) said it supported their desistance, compared to 81% ($n = 13$) of those who took mentioned the Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List, which. Further, 92% of Indigenous participants ($n = 11$) said Winnunga Nimmityjah supported their desistance, and 81% ($n = 18$) said the same for Yarrabi Bamirr, compared with 78% of those ($n = 11$) who had participated in a mainstream disability support program. This pattern may also help to explain the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, regarding the perceived impacts of mainstream services. For example, only 25% of Indigenous participants ($n = 3$) said that violence programs had supported their desistance journeys, compared with 77% ($n = 10$) of non-Indigenous participants. In the ACT, there are currently no Indigenous-specific DFV programs.

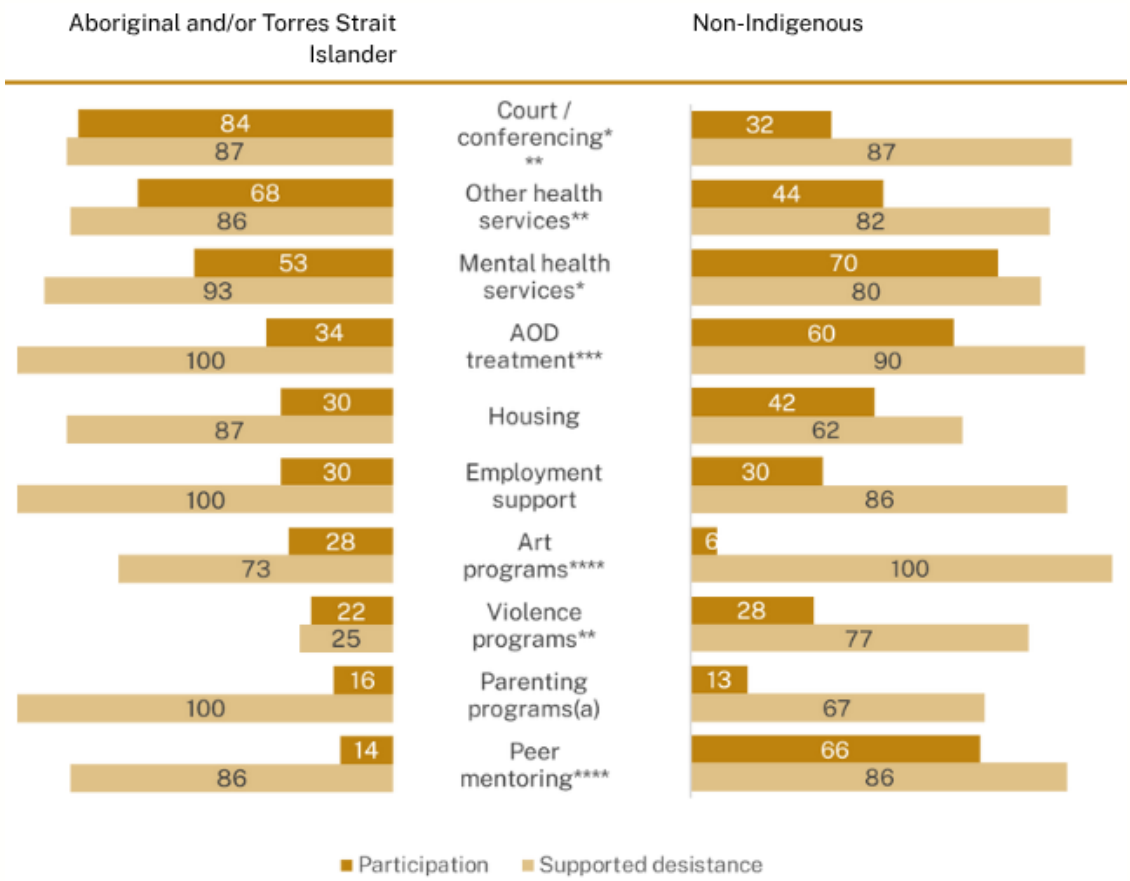
As set out above, Indigenous participants reported lower overall engagement with AOD and mental health programs. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Indigenous participants who did engage with these services said they supported their desistance (100%, $n = 17$ and 93%, $n = 25$

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

respectively). This underlines both the importance of these services and the need for culturally safe, accessible pathways into them.

Figure 28: Service engagement in past five years and whether supported desistance, by Indigenous status (%)



*p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01, ****p < 0.001

a: Sample limited to participants who had children

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Key finding

Indigenous participants were more likely than non-Indigenous participants to see family, partners, maturation, and employment as catalysts for change. By contrast, they more often identified community crime as a barrier. They engaged more with health and court programs, where there was a culturally-specific option available, but less with mainstream AOD and mental health services. Where Indigenous participants did access these services, however, they were highly valued, highlighting the importance of having a range of culturally safe supports available to support desistance.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

7. Predicting desistance

The final stage in the analysis focused on attempting to identify factors that differentiated between individuals who were at different stages of their desistance journeys, at the time of taking part in the research. Based on our analysis, 46% (*n* = 51) survey participants were persisters, 27% were emerging desisters (*n* = 30), and 24% (*n* = 29) were stable desisters (see 3.5 for a reminder of how these cohorts were defined). This section involves a description of the key factors that differentiated between these cohorts, such as their life factors, and as well as the catalysts and barriers that they identified in their lives.

7.1 Sociodemographic characteristics

Table 6 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the three cohorts. These did not differ significantly. While different patterns in gender, Indigeneity, and age were observed across groups, these were not statistically significant.

Table 6: Sociodemographic characteristics of survey participants, by desistance stage (%)

		Stable desisters *n* = 26	Emerging desisters *n* = 30	Persisters *n* = 51
Gender identity[a]	Cisgender male	27	25	48
	Cisgender female	18	36	46
	Trans or non-binary	38	13	50
Age (years)[b]	18-24	44	33	22
	25-34	29	19	52
	35-44	18	36	46
	45-54	25	33	42
	55+	0	0	0
Indigenous status[b]	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	25	23	53
	Non-Indigenous	27	31	42
Sexual orientation[c]	Heterosexual	26	27	47
	LGB+	24	29	48
Highest level of education completed[c]	Year 9 or below	5	43	52
	Year 10/11	33	20	47
	Year 12	27	36	36
	Vocational qualification	38	24	38
	University	25	17	58
Country of birth[d]	Australia	24	26	50
	Country other than Australia	40	60	0

Note: Excludes 2 participants, whose desistance stage could not be determined.

a: Excludes 3 participants who did not provide this information

b: Excludes 2 participants who did not provide this information

c: Excludes 4 participants who did not provide this information

d: Excludes 9 participants who did not provide this information

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

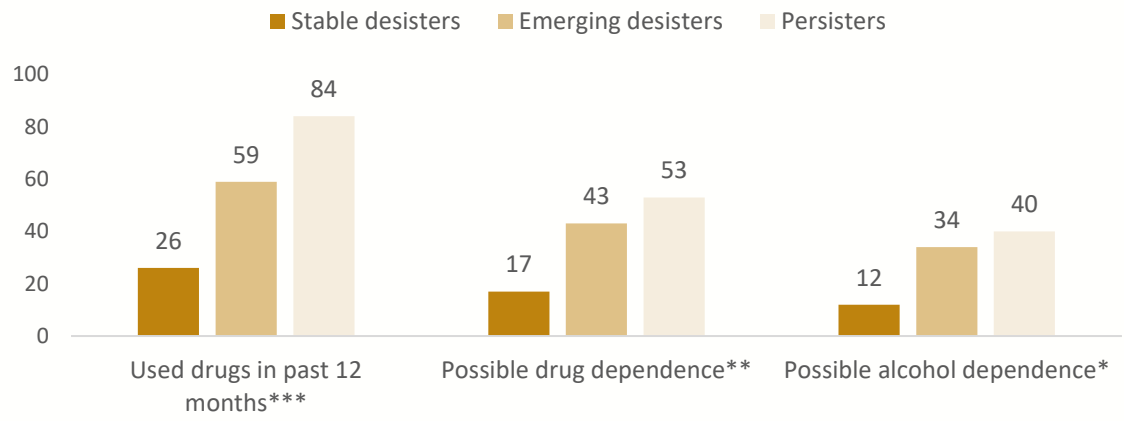
TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

7.2 AOD issues

Figure 27 sets out the patterns of AOD use for the three cohorts. Stable desisters were less likely to report recent drug use (last 12 months; 26%, *n* = 7; $X^2(2) = 24.80$, $p < 0.001$) or to have possible drug dependence (17%, *n* = 5; $X^2(2) = 9.85$, $p < 0.01$), compared to emerging desisters (59%, *n* = 17 and 43%, *n* = 13 respectively) and persisters (84%, *n* = 41 and 53%, *n* = 27 respectively). They were also less likely to have possible alcohol dependence ((defined as someone in their lives expressing concerns about their drinking (12%, *n* = 3; *Fischer's exact* = 0.031). This confirms that addressing AOD issues is an important part of someone's desistance journey and reinforces the need for a range of services to help someone address these issues.

Figure 29: AOD issues, by desistance stage (%)



Note: Excludes 7 people who did not provide this information. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

7.2 Mental health

There was no difference between the three groups regarding the presence of mental health conditions; approximately two-thirds from each cohort had a diagnosed mental health condition. However, a smaller proportion of stable desisters (26%, *n* = 7) said they had been hospitalised for mental health reasons, compared to emerging desisters (41%, *n* = 12) and persisters (51%, *n* = 25). This may indicate that this cohort had less severe or chronic mental health issues, but this difference was not statistically significant.

7.3 Family and community connections

Stable desisters were much less likely to report having two or more family members involved in their lives who also had offending histories (7%, *n* = 2), compared to emerging desisters (43%, *n* = 13) and persisters (45%, *n* = 23; Fischer's exact = 0.003). This suggests that lower exposure to family-based criminal networks may support more stable desistance. It also highlights that desistance does not merely affect individuals, but communities; accordingly, there is a need for approaches that support family members to support each others' desistance, rather than making the difficult decision to cut off family members still involved in offending.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

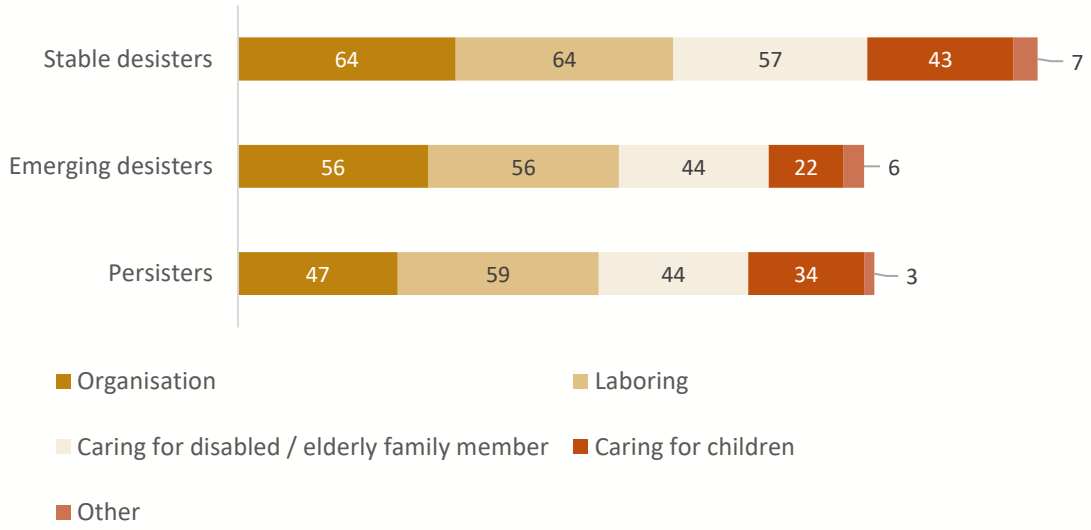
CABINET

Although a similar proportion of participants across the three cohorts reports engaging in any unpaid work, a larger proportion of stable desisters said that this work was not linked to court orders (64%, *n* = 9 vs 47%, *n* = 8 vs 39%, *n* = 12).

Similar patterns emerged when looking at the different types of unpaid work that participants were engaging in (e.g., working for an organisation, caring for children and elderly persons; Figure 28). Overall, a larger proportion of stable desisters reported engaging in all forms of unpaid work, regardless of whether they were a condition of court orders or not. These findings remained relatively stable when we only looked at participants who said their unpaid work was not a condition of orders, with one key exception. Volunteering at an organisation was associated with stable desistance, when that participation was not a condition of orders (77%, *n* = 7 vs 38%, *n* = 3 vs 8%, *n* = 1, Fischer's exact = 0.005). However, the sample was very small for this analysis (*n* = 29) so this finding should be interpreted with caution.

Although (many) of these observed differences were not statistically significant, they may indicate that pro-social community involvement—through volunteering or regular participation in activities—plays a role in strengthening and sustaining desistance. This is supported by previous sections of this report, which have highlighted the co-occurrence of community as a catalyst for change with other catalysts of change, as well as the large proportion of survey and interview participants who described community as being central to their desistance journeys (see 4.4.4 and 5.1.2).

Figure 30: Unpaid care activities undertaken by participants, by desistance stage (%)



Note: Percentage totals do not equal 100 because survey participants could select more than one unpaid activity. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Figures include participants who said that unpaid work was linked to court orders.

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

7.4 Offending history

Although overall histories of incarceration were broadly similar across the three cohorts (83%, *n* = 24 vs 77%, *n* = 23 vs 86%, *n* = 43), stable desisters tended to have later onset of contact with the criminal justice system (Figure 29). Only two stable desisters (7%) had been first proceeded against as juveniles (10-17 years old), compared with 30% of emerging

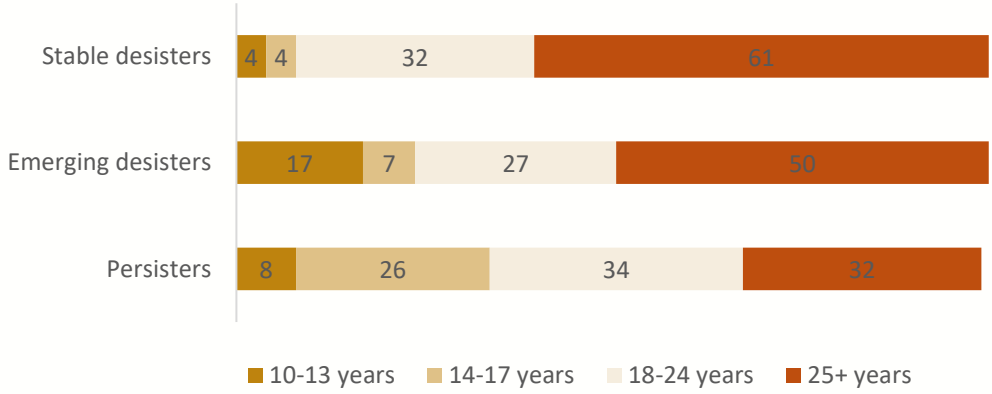
TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

desisters (n = 7) and 34% of persisters (n = 17; Fischer's exact = 0.023). Perhaps surprisingly, emerging desisters were the cohort most likely to have entered the system at a very young age, with 17% (n = 5) having first contact at 10-13, compared with 8% of persisters (n = 4).

Overall, this pattern suggests that stable desistance may be more likely—or easier to sustain—in the absence of long-term offending histories that begin in adolescence. This finding aligns with research showing that individuals whose justice system contact begins at an early age (10–13) are at higher risk of ongoing system involvement (Baidawi et al., 2024). In turn, it also suggests that additional supports are required for those who entered the system early, to address the ongoing effects of institutionalisation. This finding also affirms the benefits of the ACT Government's decision to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 (albeit with some exceptions), as delaying entry into the justice system will yield benefits for the desistance trajectories of those yet to enter the system.

Figure 31: Age of first being proceeded against or pleading guilty to an offence, by desistance stage (%)



Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice system project, 2025 [Computer file]

7.5 Catalysts and barriers to change

A small number of differences emerged in the catalysts and barriers identified by stable desisters, compared with the other two cohorts. Stable desisters were:

- more likely to identify increased self-efficacy as a catalyst for change (76%, n = 22) than persisters (44%, n = 22; $X^2(2) = 10.63$, $p < 0.01$), and
- less likely to nominate feared selves as a catalyst (59%, n = 17), compared to emerging desisters (77%, n = 23) and persisters (86%, n = 43; $X^2(2) = 7.58$, $p < 0.05$).

Stable desisters were also less likely to endorse the following barriers to desistance:

- family (21%, n = 6) compared with emerging desisters (53%, n = 16) and persisters (41%, n = 21; $X^2(2) = 6.77$, $p < 0.05$),
- AOD dependence (17%, n = 5), compared with emerging desisters (53%, n = 16) and persisters (60%, n = 30; $X^2(2) = 14.19$, $p < 0.01$), and
- criminal justice system sanctions) was also rarely identified by stable desisters (3%, n = 1), compared with both emerging desisters (30%, n = 9) and persisters (30%, n = 15; $X^2(2) = 8.49$, $p < 0.05$).

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Together, these findings suggest that stable desisters may be distinguished from other cohorts by a greater sense of self-efficacy and fewer perceived barriers to change, particularly around family, substance use, and police attention.

Key finding

Stable desistance was most likely among participants who faced fewer structural barriers, such as substance dependence, and who were less likely to have early and persistent offending histories or multiple family members involved in crime. In contrast, emerging desisters and persisters were more often burdened by these barriers. What further distinguished stable desisters was a stronger sense of self-efficacy, highlighting the combined importance of structural supports and individual agency in shaping the prospects of long-term desistance.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

8. Discussion and conclusion

This section interprets the findings of the POCS study to explore what they tell us about the processes that support or hinder change. It draws together insights from participants' experiences and the wider desistance literature to highlight key themes — including cognitive readiness, relationships and family connections, and opportunities for meaningful contribution — and outlines the implications of these findings for policy and service design in the ACT.

8.1 Key messages

8.1.1 **Readiness to change is the engine of desistance — but many people achieve this without knowing how to act on it.**

Readiness to change is central to understanding people's desistance journeys. However, readiness to change was influenced by several overlapping constructs and ideas. In particular, maturation was a critical part of the desistance process for many participants. As described previously, maturation often manifested as getting 'tired' of offending and dealing with the ongoing consequences of their behaviour — particularly incarceration, homelessness, unemployment and disconnection from loved ones, including children. Maturation was also described as taking responsibility for one's actions and no longer blaming others for offending. For some, this shift coincided with changes in priorities and the reorganisation of daily life. The birth of children and increased caring responsibilities often created new structures and expectations that made offending less likely.

Maturation, however, did not operate in isolation. It was shaped by other cognitive shifts that influenced participants' readiness to change. This included perceptions of self-efficacy — the belief that change was possible — which were, in turn, shaped by participants' social networks. Those embedded in families with intergenerational offending, or with long and entrenched offending histories, were often less likely to believe they could stop. The ability to imagine alternative selves also emerged as important. Some participants described wanting to be a better person or live in a way consistent with their values; others aspired to return to the person they were before offending.

As Rocque (2015) noted, maturation is not a singular process but a composite of social, psychological and cognitive developments that together increase individuals' capacity for change. Factors such as stable relationships, employment and community participation can reinforce these processes, while trauma, substance use and early involvement in offending can disrupt them. In this way, readiness to change reflects both personal growth and the broader developmental conditions that enable people to see — and believe in — an alternative way of living.

The idea that people 'grow out of crime' is supported by a wealth of international evidence showing that as people age, they are less likely to offend (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). This has been explained through shifts in daily activities, reduced opportunities for offending, diminished physical capacity and changes in social identity. However, our analysis suggests that maturation alone is insufficient. The impact of maturation was constrained by people's ability to see an alternative way of living and believe that change was possible. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that, while every survey participant said they wanted to stop offending, almost half were classified as persisters.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

These findings highlight the importance of recognising and supporting even low levels of readiness to change. Services that can engage people at these early stages — helping them to build self-efficacy, imagine alternative futures and experience small successes — are crucial. Readiness to change may be the spark, but sustained desistance depends on systems that can help people turn that spark into momentum.

8.1.2 **Relationships can drive – or derail – change, —making them one of the most powerful forces in desistance.**

While readiness to change is largely an internal process, participants emphasised that relationships — with partners, family, friends and children — were among the most powerful external influences on their journeys. This is an important finding, given that the desistance literature has only in the past 10 years begun to explore the role of relationships in desistance pathways. Donati (2017) and other relational sociologists (Weaver & McNeill, 2015) have argued that relationships are not simply the contexts in which behaviour occurs, but *generative goods* that help to form our sense of self and motivate our actions. As Donati noted, 'the good life is a sharing of relational goods' — meaning that human flourishing and social contribution are grounded in the quality of our relationships with others. For many participants in this study, their relationships with children, intimate partners, family members and friends provided meaning, purpose and motivation to change.

However, relationships could also be a barrier to change. In its most overt form, it may be that family members, friends and partners were pressuring the individual to keep offending. But for many participants, the criminal activities of their family members, friends and partners created opportunities for their own offending that they found difficult to resist, increased police scrutiny and also made it difficult to imagine what a non-offending future could look like.

It is therefore understandable, that for many participants, cutting off these relationships was viewed as important for their desistance journeys. However, by doing so, these individuals may have also paradoxically increased their risk of reoffending, by increasing feelings of social isolation and disconnection. This was certainly Maia's experience, as her relapse after completing AOD treatment was in part influenced by her social isolation and boredom.

This tension — between relationships as both catalysts for and constraints on change — was a recurring theme in participants' narratives. Some sought to manage this through increased self-control and cognitive reframing, enabling them to maintain their relationships without re-engaging in offending. Others relied on external supports, such as counselling or pro-social community groups, to help (re)build positive connections and fill the void left by former relationships (for more on this, see 8.1.4).

What this highlights is that programs and interventions that aim to support desistance from offending should, where possible, include a familial and/or social component and provide opportunities for engaging with familial/community units, rather than individuals in isolation. It would also be beneficial for services to have visibility of both risks and strengths in clients' lives and work with them to discuss strategies to promote desistance, while maintaining contact with people who are important to them, but who may still be involved in offending.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

8.1.3 **Children are a particularly powerful motivator for change, but motivation alone is not enough to stay connected, without support.**

Within these broader relational dynamics, relationships with children stood out as particularly significant; almost all survey and interview participants who had children said they were a catalyst for change. Consistent with other research examining the role of parenthood in desistance journeys (Barr, 2019; Boonstoppel, 2019b), the mechanisms described by participants included wanting to have an ongoing and positive role in their children's lives, which would be more difficult if they continued to offend and were incarcerated; be able to provide for their children; and use their own experiences to stop the intergenerational transmission of justice system involvement. Child-rearing was also intertwined with shifts in cognitions and maturation processes. For example, Liam felt he needed to stop offending and be there for his son, as he was 'longer the most important person'. Meanwhile, child-rearing was also associated with pro-social identities that participants wanted to live up to; as Tina said, 'I want to be a mother not a crim'. The importance of children as a catalyst for change was also supported by the finding that 90% of participants who had taken part in a parenting program said that it had supported their desistance.

However, because almost all participants with children described them as a catalyst for change, there were no significant differences across desistance groups in the selection of this factor. This suggests that, although parenthood is widely recognised as a potential 'hook for change', it is not always one that individuals are able to grasp. This finding is consistent with Boonstoppel's research, which found that male persisters identified their children as potential motivators (Boonstoppel, 2019a). Similarly, for some participants in Boonstoppel's study, feelings of guilt, shame or detachment appeared to blunt the motivational power of parenthood, constraining their ability to translate this hook into sustained behavioural change.

8.1.4 Child removal profoundly disrupts desistance, deepening trauma, undermining motivation and increasing the risk of relapse and reoffending.

Significantly, child removal profoundly disrupted many participants' desistance journeys. Losing contact with their children was described as 'having nothing left to hope for', leading to despair, renewed offending and increased substance use. For some, this created a self-perpetuating cycle: disengagement and relapse made it harder for child protection services to pursue reunification, which in turn deepened their sense of disconnection and loss. Several participants also spoke about the long-term consequences of these separations, including children choosing not to re-establish relationships in adulthood.

This is not to suggest that children are not removed for valid reasons or that all children should remained their parents' care. Rather, the findings point to the need for more coordinated service responses that enable parents to remain motivated and see a tangible link between their engagement with services and future access to their children. Systems working with parents in contact with the justice system — particularly ACTCS, AOD services and Child Youth and Protection Services — should strengthen collaboration, to ensure that parents understand what progress looks like and are supported to demonstrate it.

There is also clear value in expanding access to parenting programs that can leverage parental motivation, as a foundation for change. Such an approach has been utilised in the domestic and family violence space, with the emergence of models that are targeted at fathers (see for example, Caring Dads; Diemer et al., 2020; Hine et al., 2022). These models are underpinned by

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

similar curricula to men's behaviour change models, but also include more focus and resources around parenting, empathy, and child-parent relationships. Extending such approaches within justice settings could help maintain motivation and rebuild relationships that are both protective and restorative.

8.1.5 **The desire to 'make good' can sustain desistance, but systems often block the generative roles that strengthen change.**

Beyond relationships, participants described wanting to 'give back' or contribute to the community as an important part of their desistance journey — a source of purpose that improved self-esteem, provided structure to their days and alleviated boredom. The broader desistance literature has long recognised the importance of *generativity* in how formerly incarcerated people describe and sustain change. Maruna (2001) identified several mechanisms, through which generative action supports desistance:

- *Fulfilment:* providing a new source of meaning and achievement;
- *Exoneration:* alleviating guilt and shame by helping others;
- *Legitimacy:* adopting a recognised and respected social role; and
- *Therapy:* reinforcing one's own reform efforts through helping.(Maruna, 2001)

As such, generative activities have direct benefits for the individual, as well as the community (Maruna, 2001; McNeill & Maruna, 2007; Nixon, 2020). In particular, helping others can be rewarding and empowering, make formerly incarcerated people feel good about themselves and help them to create meaning from adversity (Halsey & Harris, 2011; LeBel et al., 2015; McNeill & Maruna, 2007.) Laura and Frank captured this sentiment, when they said they wanted to use their experiences to 'help others'.

Given these links between generativity and desistance, scholars have argued that justice systems — and prisons, in particular — should facilitate opportunities for people to engage in generative acts, rather than impede them (Healy & O'Donnell, 2008; McNeill & Maruna, 2007; Nixon, 2020; Ugelvik, 2022). This was relevant to the positive experiences James and Dylan had providing support to fellow detainees in the AMC. Similarly, Laura described how meeting people with similar backgrounds who had desisted was motivating and affirming. Yet, in practice, correctional and community requirements often limit such opportunities. For example, parole conditions can prevent association with people with criminal histories, effectively preventing formerly justice-involved people from supporting those still in the system.

Participants also emphasised the unique value of lived experience in generative work. Those who had offended and later reformed felt that this history gave them credibility and empathy when working with others. As Nixon noted, lived experience can enhance legitimacy — clients know that the support worker 'gets it' (Nixon, 2020). This was echoed by Frank, who said working with a therapist who had also experienced child sexual abuse helped him to open up and engage in sessions, while Dylan said his mentorship of younger detainees 'resonated', because of their shared backgrounds.

Generativity can also take the form of storytelling. Many formerly incarcerated people find meaning and affirmation in sharing their experiences publicly — using redemption narratives to demonstrate that change is possible and to instil hope in others. While the desistance literature has typically focused on how these narratives help maintain one's own desistance,

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

they can equally serve a pro-social function: legitimising desistance to others and modelling what change looks like. As Maruna noted, 'Counselling similar others can also provide a constant reminder of the purpose of reform' (Maruna, 2001, p. 124).

Despite its benefits, participants in this study identified several barriers that limited their capacity to engage in generative work. The Working With Vulnerable People (WWVP) scheme (ACT Government, 2025b) was identified as a key obstacle. This is required for many client-facing roles in the ACT – notably, the framework is broader than most jurisdictions and includes mental health, addiction and homelessness services, justice facilities, crime prevention, victims of crime and services for people with disability or those experiencing financial hardship. Accordingly, this option is unavailable to those who have the most to gain themselves and offer others. Maia described how her inability to obtain a WWVP card prevented her from becoming a sports coach, while another participant reflected that losing his AOD counsellor position, after being denied clearance, contributed to his relapse into substance use. While not referencing the WWVP check process specifically, Dylan expressed some disappointment that his criminal history meant he would be unable to work in government, where he may have been able to use his experiences to inform policy and practice. These examples illustrate how criminal records and regulatory frameworks can inadvertently curtail the very forms of work that reinforce desistance and enable people to 'make good'.

Without avenues to practise generativity, the motivation to 'make good' risks stagnating. Supporting generative roles within justice, community and service contexts therefore represents a practical means of aligning internal readiness with the structural conditions needed to sustain lasting change.

8.1.6 **Motivation cannot overcome unmet needs and desistance is impossible, without addressing disability, health and substance use**

The ability to ‘make good’ is not simply a matter of motivation. For many participants, health and disability issues posed daily challenges that affected their capacity to work, volunteer or engage in the community. These experiences highlight how desistance is shaped not only by willingness to change, but also by the realities of health, trauma and access to care.

Most survey participants reported that they had a disability, mental health and/or drug issues and nearly one in five (18%) reported having all three. As set out in 4.5, 26% of survey participants indicated that they had a disability. However, the figure was likely higher, as 43% had been hospitalised for mental health issues and 48% had failed to do what was normally expected of them on a weekly or daily basis, because of drug issues.

There is an increasing recognition of the over-representation of people with disability in the criminal justice system (Poynton et al., 2023; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2023). Research with stakeholders working at the intersection of disability and criminal justice in NSW, Victoria and the ACT has identified three common themes in this context:

- there are gaps in identifying people in prison with disability, especially in the context of invisible disability,
- detention environments do not support people with disability, and

CABINET

- behaviour change programs require people to have a certain level of literacy for participation (Dickinson et al., 2024).

In related research, the authors noted the challenges that working with this cohort can present. As one of their interviewees put it:

> *Most people don't like a client group that tell you to get fucked, and funding doesn't really enable a holistic model of support for the client group. It's compartmentalised and it's because NDIS funding is supposed to be in additional to. It's supposed to be building on something that already exists in the community that they can enhance your standard of living. Well, there's nothing in the community to build on (Dickinson et al., 2024, p. 99).*

Our findings again reinforced these points. For example, it was only after more than three decades in and out of youth and adult justice systems, Lucy got a 'got a proper diagnosis when I got out of jail this time', while several were diagnosed with ADHD and '[k]nowing what was going on helped heaps'. James also spoke about people who 'snap at the services that are trying to provide them the help… they're snapping because they're at breaking point'.

There is a clear need to ensure underlying health issues are appropriately identified and treated. In addition, responses must be tailored to meet the needs of people with disability (including trauma). The ACT Government has already taken some steps in this regard, with the development of a *Disability justice strategy* (ACT Government, 2019), the ACT Corrective Services (2023) *Disability framework* and in its responses to the Disability Royal Commission; ACT Government, 2024) The ACT Corrective Services *Disability framework* states that 'respect and dignity for people with disability is essential in delivering a client centred service' and ACTCS has committed to placing clients with disability 'at the centre of service planning and delivery' (ACT Government, 2023, p. 6). Recently, the ACT Inspector of Custodial Services noted that the AMC 'does not have suitable accommodation options for people with complex health or disability needs including for older detained people' (2025). Recommendation 17 (although also findings 33 and 40) states that:

> *Within 6 months, ACT Corrective Services prioritise commitments made under its Disability Action and Inclusion Plan 2024–2026 as they specifically relate to detained people with neurodivergent conditions including screening tools, reasonable adjustments and other supports.*

The data in this report indicate that implementing these initiatives will yield a range of benefits, including increased desistance from crime.

For many, addressing their physical and mental health issues, including through exercise, diet, meditation and medication, appeared to be key part of their desistance pathway. Stable desisters were much less likely to report recent drug use than persisters (17% vs 84%), suggesting the crucial role of effective substance use treatment. However, participants also identified some barriers to engaging in healthy activities, including financial strain and lack of access to services, as well as relying on substances to deal with ongoing trauma. Accordingly, steps should be taken to help overcome these barriers. This could include increased financial support, childcare, transport and cooking classes. Supporting community activities (e.g., gardening groups, boxing clubs) may be particularly valuable, as they will also bring people together and may yield further benefits, if they are led by people with similar experiences.

CABINET

8.1.7 **Desistance for Indigenous people requires culturally-led, holistic support that counters systemic inequality and strengthens connection.**

The previous findings highlight that health and wellbeing issues are deeply connected to structural inequality. This was particularly evident for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, whose experiences reflect the ongoing effects of colonisation and systemic bias across health, social and justice systems.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT experience the highest over-representation in imprisonment rates of any Australian jurisdiction (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Recent research undertaken on behalf of the ACT Government identified 'systemic racism and lack of cultural safety across different parts of government as significant drivers' of this over—representation (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017; Cuneen et al., 2025, p. xix). This extensive report made 99 recommendations, which are currently being considered by the Government. It is beyond the scope of this report to revisit the issues raised there, but we note the following comment:

> *A consistent issue raised in our discussions was the need for wraparound services when people are exiting custody, on bail supervision or other community-based order including parole. It widely acknowledged that both Yeddung Mura and Winnunga provide some wraparound supports to their best of their capabilities. …Closely connected to the concept of wraparound services and holistic approaches is breaking down siloed approaches within government. For example, it was noted one focus was potentially on families…there is also a need for a focus on those who are on community corrections orders who haven't been in prison, particularly to be less compliance driven and more concentrated on better outcomes.(ACT Government, 2025a, p. 373)*

The report also identified the need for dedicated caseworkers 'to work with people on the pathway out of the justice system. Such a pathway requires everything to work' (2025: 374). Furthermore, concerns were raised about funding models, which operate in silos, which undermine the scope for wraparound models.

This research aligns with our findings. Over half of the participants in this project were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. This cohort experienced additional challenges compared to the non-Indigenous participants, including living in a high-crime area. They also placed greater importance on family connections, compared with non-Indigenous participants, and endorsed the culturally appropriate programs that are currently available, such as the Galambany Court and Yeddung Mura. In particular, the focus group highlighted the need for holistic support that aligns both practical issues (e.g., how to use a phone, set up Medicare) and cultural connection (e.g., yarning with Elders).

It is worth noting that 43% of Indigenous participants in this project explicitly mentioned the Yarrabi Bamirr program. According to the ACT Government's website, (ACT Government, 2025a) it is currently available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have:

- contact with the justice system,
- children, and
- experienced intergenerational trauma.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

The program aims to support families' personal and social wellbeing and covers issues such as education, health and access to justice and community services.

A small-scale evaluation by Payne and Fogarty found that participants' 'family, social and personal outlook improved', (2019: 8). This included an increased sense of empowerment (which links to self-efficacy), life satisfaction and happiness, access to health services and community participation. This aligns with many of the needs identified by participants in this research, as well as the findings of a recent national longitudinal study of 1,500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, (Rogers et al., 2025) which revealed that:

- participation in cultural activities, connection to Country, speaking an Indigenous language and identifying with Mob supported stronger social-emotional wellbeing in middle childhood and adolescence,
- parents who reported strong wellbeing during the period prior to their child starting school were more likely to report higher parental warmth and lower use of harsh discipline, and
- higher parental wellbeing was associated with better overall health among children, improved literacy, increased school engagement and lower psychological distress in adolescence.

This demonstrates the wide-ranging and intergenerational benefits of holistic, strengths-based, culturally led approaches *outside* the criminal justice system, which enable whole families and communities to thrive.

8.1.8 **Motivation matters — but only thrives when matched by housing, income, stability and responsive services.**

Our findings underline the importance of understanding desistance not solely as a matter of individual choice or motivation, but as a process shaped by structural conditions and opportunities. The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in particular highlight how systemic inequities can limit the capacity to change, even when the motivation to do so is strong. The following section explores this balance between cognitive and structural factors in greater detail.

The findings from this study highlight the need for balance between cognitive and structural factors in supporting desistance. Participants consistently described the importance of cognitive shifts — the readiness to change, the desire to live differently and the motivation drawn from relationships with others — but it was equally clear that these shifts were not sufficient on their own. Desistance was most likely when motivation coincided with the right conditions: when people had housing, income, access to treatment and services that met their needs. Insight and determination might start the process, but structural supports are what will enable it to continue.

This aligns with integrated models of desistance, which emphasise that both internal and external factors are essential. As many participants noted, desistance is not a single event but an ongoing process that must be maintained daily, often in the face of distressing life events, financial strain and social isolation. Maintaining that motivation requires more than willpower — it requires stability. Laura captured this tension, when she said she would 'always be an addict', reflecting both her commitment to staying well and her awareness of how fragile that commitment can feel, without consistent support. Cameron and Bill similarly reflected that

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

they were actively trying to keep themselves busy, because when they get 'bored', they tend to do 'silly stuff'.

Giordano et al., (2002) and others have suggested that cognitive factors, such as self-efficacy become particularly important, when structural supports are lacking. This was evident in the contrast between participants like Dylan and others with more complex needs. Dylan described his process of leaving prison as relatively straightforward: he had stable housing, financial security and self-employment, all of which helped him to reintegrate. He also acknowledged that his education, communication skills and social capital made it easier for him to navigate the service system — advantages that many others simply did not have. Ironically, those who needed services the most were often those least equipped to access or benefit from them.

This issue of privilege was also raised by James, who reflected that his own communication skills made him better placed to engage with services than many of his peers. He noted that, while he still faced challenges, others were set up to fail, because of the difficulty of accessing coordinated and responsive support, which could lead to anti-social and aggressive presentations and subsequently being blocked from supports. For participants with fewer resources and more complex needs, desistance required persistent engagement with multiple service systems, just to meet basic needs, often while managing ongoing stress, trauma or instability.

Taken together, these findings point to the importance of addressing both sides of the equation. Cognitive change without structural support is rarely sustainable, but structural support without motivation is unlikely to yield lasting results. Supporting desistance, therefore, requires systems that do both: nurture motivation and agency, while ensuring that people have the material, relational and institutional supports they need to live differently.

8.1.9 **Preventing 'f*ck it' moments requires systems that respond early, treat people with dignity and actively cultivate hope.**

While sustained desistance depends on the interaction between cognitive and structural supports, this balance can be fragile. When circumstances become overwhelming — through stress, loss, or frustration with systems — even those who are motivated to change can experience what participants described as 'fuck it' moments. These moments mark points where the effort to maintain change falters, revealing how easily motivation can collapse in the absence of support.

Building on the previous point about service systems currently being more accessible by certain 'types' of people who offend – i.e., those with lower needs and good communication and social skills – is the reflection from many survey and interview participants about the ways in which the justice and service systems can create barriers to desistance. This was primarily described through the lens of not being able to access the supports they needed, when they needed to. For example, Lucy pointed out as well as being treated in ways that they perceived as unfair by service providers and justice system actors. These experiences were seen as especially galling, when they said that they had been taking active steps to reduce or stop offending and improve their lives.

These experiences can lead to 'people subjected to criminal justice supervision reach[ing] a critical limit and simply decid[ing], "fuck it"' (Halsey et al., 2017, p. 1042). In fact, this terminology was prominent across our data. In their research with 74 currently and formerly

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

incarcerated people in Australia, the United Kingdom and United States, Halsey et al. found that each participant reported such 'fuck it' scenarios. Notably, they unfolded in a broadly similar way, with the participant:

- expressing the *desire* to desist from crime or at least significantly reduce the frequency and severity of their offending),
- reporting instances where they felt themselves 'sliding towards old ways' (this entailed both recognition in the moment and retrospective recognition of the situation),
- reflecting on how they were unable to find timely and effective support, while they were 'going off the rails'. Furthermore, efforts to 'reach out' were 'often being met with castigation, stigmatization, alienation and where it involved infraction, being breached and/or reincarcerated (Halsey et al., 2017, p. 1051), and
- framing the subsequent 'fuck it' as a response to unworkable situations (involving their relationship to self, others and future), which had not been their preferred choice.

Nearly half of our survey participants (46%) were characterised as *persisters* at the time of participating in our research, while 24 per cent were *stable desisters.* Compared with stable desisters, persisters were much more likely to have:

- engaged in recent drug use (84% vs 17%),
- only been educated up to Year 9 (52% vs 5%),
- been hospitalised for mental health issues (51% vs 26%), and
- first had criminal justice system involvement as a juvenile (34% vs 7%).

In light of these deeply entrenched issues, it is hardly surprised that the temptation to return to known habits. As Liam put it, 'a lot of the boys would have given up by now. Go back to selling drugs and fucking doing cool shit, because it's easy'. As a result, for many participants, services and the absence of structural supports, created situations where they had little hope for the future, and contributed to a 'fuck it' mentality, where reoffending was seen as the only viable alternative. To address this situation, Halsey et al. called for a model to that those who have been in prison are

> *surrounded with a dedicated network of people who can be contacted around the clock (literally 24/7) about issues weighing heavily on them. These problems need to be dealt with openly, fully and in ways that validate good intentions and progress, even where this involves apparent failures…such services, at the end of the day, are reducible to the skills and relationships among people. This means investing in, and taking the time to build, lines of trust and legitimacy with those juggling the multifaceted challenges of desistance (emphasis in original; (Halsey et al., 2017, p. 1054).*

They went on to explain that 'formal recognition of efforts to succeed, even in the face of failure, can help to neutralize fatalism and reignite hope' (Halsey et al., 2017, p. 1055).

Research has highlighted the unique role that people with lived experience can play in this regard: a systematic literature review by Lenkens et al. (2024) suggested that peer workers show empathy, are non-judgmental and considered role models, can establish a trusting relationship with clients, connect clients to other services, have a recovery perspective on

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

desistance and offer hope. This was again illustrated in our data, with participants being inspired by others who had had similar experiences. For example, Lucy said that 'to see how far some of the people that work there have come, like, gives me the hope that I can get somewhere with it'.

There is growing understanding of the importance of hope in this context (Best, 2019; Hamilton & Bartels, 2025; Van Ginneken, 2015, 2017). LeBel et al. found that hope can precede changes in social circumstances, such as housing (LeBel et al., 2008). They hypothesised that a subjective sense of hope may both help people to take advantage of positive opportunities and manage inevitable setbacks better. However, as Burnett and Maruna observed, 'the impact of hope shrinks as the number of problems encountered rises' (Burnett & Maruna, 2004, p. 399). Accordingly, sustaining hope should not be seen purely as an individual, subjective endeavour.

Recent research for HM Inspectorate of Probation(Ali et al., 2025) has reinforced that barriers to promoting hope in community supervision include a focus on technical compliance and risk management, while enablers include adopting person-centred and strengths-based practices and substantive compliance. More broadly, Bartels has noted that:

> *'[p]overty, homelessness, mental illness, poor education and unemployment can undermine the self-determination of the most committed would-be desister…It is therefore all the more important to develop and sustain subjective change in an unequal world'.(Bartels, 2017, p. 263)*

In sum, this points to the need for holistic approaches that address underlying the causes of crime and provide intensive, non-judgmental support to minimise the risk of 'fuck it' moments and (re)build a sense of hope. Wherever possible, this should draw on the expertise of people who have successfully navigated similar waters themselves.

8.1.10 Summary

Taken together, these findings show that desistance is not a single event but a process shaped by both internal motivation and the systems that surround people. Supporting people to change requires responses that build confidence, provide stability, and recognise the relational and structural contexts in which change occurs. The following section outlines practical strategies to strengthen these supports in the ACT context.

8.2 Implications for the ACT: Building a service system that supports desistance

8.2.1 The social determinants of justice

McCausland and Baldry drew on linked administrative data from NSW, to identify eight factors that they have termed the 'social determinants of justice':

- having been in out-of-home care,
- receiving a poor school education,
- being Indigenous,
- having early contact with police,
- having unsupported mental health and cognitive disability,

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

- problematic alcohol and other drug use,
- experiencing homelessness or unstable housing, and
- coming from or living in a disadvantaged location (McCausland & Baldry, 2023).

Unsurprisingly, the risk of (re)incarceration increases, when more of these factors are present. Crucially, these factors do not exist in a social vacuum. Accordingly, McCausland and Baldry found that the 'causes of the causes' of these factors are linked to:

- the entrenchment of poverty and unequal access to resources in families and communities,
- structural racism and discrimination, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people with disability,
- the failure to address childhood experiences of abuse, violence and trauma, and
- the criminogenic operation of the criminal justice system itself, which increases – rather than reducing – the likelihood of future incarceration.

These elements were evident in various ways in the experiences of the participants in this study. Over half of the participants in our study were **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander**. The survey data revealed that 19% had **low levels of formal education** (Year 9 or below) and 16% had been **homeless** (e.g., sleeping on the streets) in the last year. Nearly two-thirds (65%) had a diagnosed **mental health condition** (65%) or had used illicit or non-prescribed **drugs** in the past 12 months, while 26% identified as having a **disability**. Many of the survey participants had also had **early justice system contact**. The interviews expanded on these themes. For example, Laura, Lucy, Frank and James spoke of their childhood experiences of **childhood sexual abuse** and several explicitly recognised the links between their **substance use and unresolved trauma**. Meanwhile, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants were more likely to have family members who were also deeply embedded in the justice system. .

The social determinants of justice research provides a useful framework for situating the experiences of people like the participants in our study in a broader social context. The University of NSW recently expanded the scope of this research, by launching the Social Determinants of Justice Research Hub, to support 'systems-focused and community-led research and education that aims to address those determinants and reduce the criminalisation and incarceration of disadvantaged and targeted groups of people'.

8.2.2 Best practice approaches to 'breaking the cycle'

A recent position paper from the Justice Reform Initiative, *Post-release, re-entry & breaking cycles of disadvantage and imprisonment*, highlighted that:

> *Access to effective, appropriate, and culturally meaningful pre-release support and post-release reintegration programs is critical to prevent a cycle of re-offending and further incarceration…(Sotiri & Schetzer, 2024, p. 27)*

The authors went on to explain that successful programs:

> *acknowledge the importance of recognising the social drivers of over-incarceration, working holistically with people leaving prison, ensuring a*

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

> *flexible and person-centred approach to service delivery, and working long-term with people to address the significant challenges in 'staying out' of prison. The research identifies the centrality of relational casework, the importance of housing, and the necessity of long-term support.*
>
> *Models that work are very much about 'meeting people where they are at' and recognising the enormous challenges faced by people leaving prison. Effective programs do not require people at risk of justice system involvement to fit into models that are appointment-based, require abstinence, or have limited flexibility. The successful programs also recognise the referral fatigue experienced by many people and recognise the importance of non-siloed service provision; that is, services that are able to work with people around a range of issues (housing, mental health, alcohol and other drug use; Sotiri & Schetzer, 2024, p. 7).*

This aligns with a recommendation from the Jumbunna review, which noted that:

> *Increasing opportunities for reintegration and support post release should be contextualised by the principles of wraparound and holistic support.*
>
> *We recommend the ACT government provide funding for increased access to:*
>
> *i. crisis and transitional housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people exiting custody, with recognition/ prioritisation of the particular needs of First Nations women and children*
>
> *ii. culturally appropriate drug and alcohol counselling*
>
> *iii. greater support in the community for employment pathways and training programs*
>
> *iv. accessible and First Nations-led support, well-being and mentorship programs*
>
> *v. accessible and First Nations-led driver licensing programs and literacy and numeracy programs* (Cuneen et al., 2025).

The Justice Reform Initiative position paper also outlined the following *best practice principles for re-entry*:

- reintegration should be framed outside the lens of rehabilitation; instead, the focus should be on 'building a life' (Sotiri & Schetzer, 2024, p. 8),
- access to housing is crucial, as very few people can reintegrate effectively, without somewhere safe to sleep. Lack of housing also makes other factors that support desistance, such as securing and maintaining employment, much harder,
- engaging with people pre-release, where possible – this is also important for developing a relationship of trust and to do practical pre-release planning,
- holistic, relational, intensive and long-term casework models – it is vital to understand that it takes time to build trust for people who have experienced trauma and have complex needs. Far too often, programs only receive short-term funding (e.g., weeks or months), whereas programs may need to be open-ended, with scope for clients to even check in years later,

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

- community-based/community-led approaches – services should be based in the communities their clients live in (or are seeking to live in) and understand their issues first-hand,
- where relevant, they should be Indigenous-led; this is essential to address intergenerational trauma and distrust, and
- finally, lived experience should be incorporated at all levels – from service design to delivery and evaluation.

Again, this is consistent with what our participants identified and should underpin future whole-of-government approaches. For example, although there was significant criticism of the current ACT criminal justice system, participants also provided numerous examples of positive experiences with police, judicial and correctional officers, who treated them 'like a human' (James) and were 'amazing' (Laura). At least 90% of survey participants also indicated that AOD, employment and parenting programs supported their desistance. This reinforces the significance of effective service delivery approaches.

8.2.3 Criminal justice supervision models

In light of the foregoing, it is worth returning to the principles introduced in section 2.2, which were developed by McNeill et al. for criminal justice practice:

1. Desistance, especially for those who have been involved in persistent offending, is a difficult and complex process and likely to involve lapses and relapses. Criminal justice supervision should therefore realistic and find ways to manage setbacks and difficulties constructively. It may take considerable time for supervision and support to exercise a positive effect.
2. Since desistance is an inherently individualised and subjective process, approaches to criminal justice social work supervision must accommodate and build on issues of identity and diversity. One-size-fits-all interventions will not work.
3. Developing and maintaining motivation and hope are key tasks for criminal justice practitioners.
4. Desistance can only be understood within the context of human relationships, both between workers and people who offend and those who matter to them
5. The focus is often on risks and needs, but people who offend also have personal and social strengths and resources they can use to overcome obstacles to. Supporting and developing these capacities can be a useful dimension of criminal justice practice.
6. Since desistance is in part about discovering self-efficacy or agency, interventions are most likely to be effective where they encourage and respect self-determination; this means working *with* people not *on* them.
7. Interventions based only on developing the capacities and skills of people who have offended (human capital) will not be enough – it is also critical to work on developing social capital, opportunities to apply these skills or to practise newly forming identities (eg 'worker' or 'father'; McNeill et al., 2012).

CABINET

CABINET

The language of practice should strive to more clearly recognise positive potential and development and seek to avoid identifying people with the behaviours we want them to leave behind.

The authors concluded with a poignant observation that provides the ultimate guidance on the pathway out of crime:

> *if the route is blocked, for example, by the practical effects of a criminal record or by the stickiness of the criminal label and the refusal of the community to accept that someone has changed, then desistance may be quickly derailed.*
>
> *Sometimes, the road from crime – to restoration as a citizen …[is] through repaired relationships – within families, within communities, within the state – and not just through 'correction' of the individual (McNeill et al., 2012, p. 10).*

Each person's path into crime is different, although many common themes emerge. Likewise, everyone's path out of crime will differ - for some, there may be a singular turning point, such as parenting, meditation or sport. For many, it will be a constellation of factors. Because everyone is unique, their desistance journey will also be unique. Best practice means addressing both the structural factors that cause crime and impede desistance *and* supporting and celebrating people as individuals and thereby enabling them and their communities to flourish.

References

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

9. References

Abell, L. (2018). Exploring the Transition to Parenthood as a Pathway to Desistance. *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*, *4*(4), 395–426. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40865-018-0089-6

ACT Government. (2019). *Disability justice strategy: 2019-2029*. ACT Government.

ACT Government. (2023). *Disability Justice Strategy – Fourth Annual Progress Report.* ACT Government. https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/2355313/2_4th-Annual-Report-of-the-Disability-Justice-Strategy.pdf

ACT Government. (2024). *ACT Government Response Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability Final Report*. ACT Government.

ACT Government. (2025a). *Justice services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.* https://www.act.gov.au/law-and-justice/justice-services-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples

ACT Government. (2025b). *Working With Vulnerable People scheme.* https://www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/business-and-work/working-with-vulnerable-people/working-with-vulnerable-people-scheme

ACT Inspector of Correctional Services. (2022). *Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2022*. ACT ICS. https://www.ics.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2111964/11432R-ACT-ICS-Healthy-Prison-Review-Nov-2022_tagged_FA-updated.pdf

ACT Inspector of Correctional Services. (2025). *Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2025*. ACT ICS. ACT Inspector of Correctional Services

Agan, A., & Starr, S. (2017). The Effect of Criminal Records on Access to Employment. *American Economic Review*, *107*(5), 560–564. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.p20171003

Agbaria, N., Wirth, M., Winkler, V., Moazen, B., Hout, M. C. V., & Stöver, H. (2024). Determinants of access to primary healthcare for formerly incarcerated women transitioning into the community: A systematic review of the literature. *BMJ Public Health*, *2*(2). https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjph-2023-000735

Ali, A., Dockley, A., Farrall, S., Lewis, S., Phillips, J., & Stevens, K. (2025). *Hope and Probation: Using the lens of hope to reimagine probation practice*. http://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/32/2025/04/Hope-and-Probation-Using-the-lens-of-hope-to-reimagine-probation-practice-Academic-Insights.pdf

Anderson, E. (2015). "The White Space." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, *1*(1), 10–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649214561306

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *Prisoners in Australia* [Dataset].

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025). *Recorded Crime—Offenders, Australia, 2023-2024*. ABS.

Australian Government. (2023). *Change to classification of psilocybin and MDMA to enable prescribing by authorised psychiatrists*.

Australian Government. (2025). *Mental health care and Medicare*. https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/mental-health-care-and-medicare?context=60092

Australian Law Reform Commission. (2017). *Pathways to Justice—An Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (No. 133; ALRC Report).

Baidawi, S., Ball, R., Sheehan, R., & Papalia, N. (2024). *Children aged 10 to 13 in the justice system: Characteristics, alleged offending and legal outcomes* (No. CRG 41/20–21; Criminology Research Grants). Australian Institute of Criminology.

Barr, Ú. (2019). *Desisting Sisters*. Springer.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Barra, S., Turner, D., Retz-Junginger, P., Hertz, P. G., Rösler, M., & Retz, W. (2022). Mental health in young detainees predicts perpetration of and desistance from serious, violent and chronic offending. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *13*, 893460.

Bartels, L. (2017). HOPE probation: A new path to desistance? *European Journal of Probation*, *9*(3), 248–266. https://doi.org/10.1177/2066220317741882

Bartels, L., Easteal, P., & Westgate, R. (2020). Understanding Women's Imprisonment in Australia. *Women & Criminal Justice*, *30*(3), 204–219. https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2019.1657550

Besemer, S., Ahmad, S. I., Hinshaw, S. P., & Farrington, D. P. (2017). A systematic review and meta-analysis of the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *37*, 161–178. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.10.004

Besemer, S., Farrington, D. P., & Bijleveld, C. C. (2013). Official bias in intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour. *British Journal of Criminology*, *53*(3), 438–455.

Best, D. (2019). *Pathways to recovery and desistance*. Policy Press. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/24762

Boonstoppel, S. (2019a). "It's Not About Me No More": Fatherhood and Mechanisms of Desistance Among At-Risk Men. *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*, *5*(3), 335–365. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40865-019-00120-9

Boonstoppel, S. (2019b). "It's Not About Me No More": Fatherhood and Mechanisms of Desistance Among At-Risk Men. *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*, *5*(3), 335–365. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40865-019-00120-9

Bottoms, A. (2006). Desistance, social bonds, and human agency: A theoretical exploration. In *The explanation of crime: Context, mechanisms, and development* (pp. 243–290). Cambridge University Press.

Bottoms, A., & Shapland, J. (2011). Steps towards desistance among male young adult recidivists. In *Escape routes: Contemporary perspectives on life after punishment* (pp. 43–80). Routledge.

Bottoms, A., & Shapland, J. (2019). Introducing 'desistance'into criminal justice supervision policies and practices: Possibilities and challenges. *The Architecture of Desistance*, 249–277.

Bottoms, A., Shapland, J., Costello, A., Holmes, D., & Muir, G. (2004). Towards desistance: Theoretical underpinnings for an empirical study. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, *43*(4), 368–389. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2004.00336.x

Boxall, H. (2023). *Reimagining Desistance from Male-Perpetrated Intimate Partner Violence: The Role and Experiences of Female Victim-Survivors*. Springer Nature.

Boxall, H., Meyer, S., Bartels, L., & Fitz-Gibbon, K. (2023). Chapter 20. Conducting research with, and on perpetrators of domestic and family violence: Insights from Australian research. In *Fieldwork Experiences in Criminology and Security: Methods, Ethics, and Emotions*. Springer Nature.

Burke, C., Ellis, J. D., Peltier, M. R., Roberts, W., Verplaetse, T. L., Phillips, S., Moore, K. E., Marotta, P. L., & McKee, S. A. (2023). Adverse Childhood Experiences and Pathways to Violent Behavior for Women and Men. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *38*(3–4), 4034–4060. https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221113012

Burnett, R., & Maruna, S. (2004). So 'Prison Works', Does It? The Criminal Careers of 130 Men Released from Prison under Home Secretary, Michael Howard. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, *43*(4), 390–404. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2004.00337.x

Crewe, B., & Ievins, A. (2020). The prison as a reinventive institution. *Theoretical Criminology*, *24*(4), 568–589. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480619841900

Cuneen, C., Allison, F., Beaufils, J., Corrales, T., & Selouk, A. (2025). *Independent Review into the Over-Representation of First Nations People in the ACT Criminal Justice System: Final report*. Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, UTS.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Daly, A., Barrett, G., & Williams, R. (2020). *Cost Benefit Analysis of Galambany Court*. Justice and Community Safety Directorate. https://www.academia.edu/download/67538211/Galambany_CBA_final.pdf

Dawkins, Z., Brookes, M., Middlin, K., & Crossley, P. (2011). *County Koori Court of Victoria: Final Evaluation Report*. County Court of Victoria and the Victorian Department of Justice.

Dewitt, J., Capistrant, B., Kohli, N., Rosser, B. S., Mitteldorf, D., Merengwa, E., & West, W. (2018). Addressing participant validity in a small internet health survey (The Restore Study): Protocol and recommendations for survey response validation. *JMIR Research Protocols*, *7*(4), e7655.

Dickinson, H., Yates, S., Dodd, S., Buick, F., & Doyle, C. (2024). "Most people don't like a client group that tell you to get fucked": Choice and control in Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme for formerly incarcerated people. *Public Policy and Administration*, *39*(1), 87–105. https://doi.org/10.1177/09520767221134320

DiClemente, C. C., & Prochaska, J. O. (1998). Toward a comprehensive, transtheoretical model of change: Stages of change and addictive behaviors. In W. R. Miller & N. Heather (Eds.), *Applied clinical psychology: Treating addictive behaviors* (pp. 3–24). Plenum Press.

Diemer, K., Humphreys, C., Fogden, L., Gallant, D., Spiteri-Staines, A., Bornemisza, A., & Vercoe, E. (2020). *Caring Dads program*. https://vawc.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-Caring-Dads-Final-Report-23-3-2020.pdf

Doherty, E. E., & Ensminger, M. E. (2013). Marriage and offending among a cohort of disadvantaged African Americans. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *50*(1), 104–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427811423106

Doyle, C., Yates, S., Bartels, L., Hopkins, A., & Taylor, H. (2024). "People say you're going home, but I don't have a home": Housing After Prison. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *68*(13–14), 1403–1420. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X221132226

Fader, J. J., & Traylor, L. L. (2015). Dealing with Difference in Desistance Theory: The Promise of Intersectionality for New Avenues of Inquiry. *Sociology Compass*, *9*(4), 247–260. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12253

Farrall, S. (2009). Explorations in theories of desistance: Societal-level approaches to reform — An introduction. *Theoretical Criminology*, *13*(1), 5–8. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480608100170

Farrall, S., Hunter, B., & Sharpe, G. (2014). *Criminal careers in transition: The social context of desistance from crime*. Oxford University Press.

Farrall, S., Warr, J., Shaw, A., & Sharma, K. (2025). What Do We Know About How Processes of Desistance Vary by Ethnicity? *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, *64*(3), 279–294. https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12606

Gadd, D. (2006). The role of recognition in the desistance process: A case analysis of a former far-right activist. *Theoretical Criminology*, *10*(2), 179–202. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480606063138

Giles, F. C., McKenzie, M., Kyei-Nimakoh, M., Satyen, L., Tarzia, L., & Hegarty, K. (2025). Management of imposter participants when conducting online research with victim-survivors and perpetrators of violence. *Methodological Innovations*, *18*(2), 79–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/20597991251333345

Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Holland, D. D. (2003). Changes in Friendship Relations Over the Life Course: Implications for Desistance from Crime. *Criminology*, *41*(2), 293–328. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2003.tb00989.x

Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, *107*(4), 990–1064.

Glueck, S., & Glueck, E. (1950). Unraveling juvenile delinquency. *Juv. Ct. Judges J.*, *2*, 32.

Gottfredson, M. R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime.* Stanford University Press.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Graffam, J., Shinkfield, A. J., Lavelle, B., & Hardcastle, L. (2004). *Attitudes of employers, corrective services workers, employment support workers, and prisoners and offenders towards employing ex-prisoners and ex-offenders* (Criminology Research Grants). Australian Institute of Criminology. https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/200203-26.pdf

Halsey, M. (2016). In search of desistance: Notes from an Australian study. In *Global Perspectives on Desistance*. Routledge.

Halsey, M., Armstrong, R., & Wright, S. (2017). 'F* ck It!': Matza and the Mood of Fatalism in the Desistance Process. *British Journal of Criminology*, *57*(5), 1041–1060.

Halsey, M., & Harris, V. (2011). Prisoner futures: Sensing the signs of generativity. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, *44*(1), 74–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0004865810393100

Hamilton, S., & Bartels, L. (2025). Justice Capital: Delivering Equitable Outcomes for Indigenous Children in State Care. In *The Handbook of Recovery Capital* (pp. 211–230). Bristol University Press. https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/edcollchap/book/9781529240306/ch011.xml

Healy, D., & O'Donnell, I. (2008). Calling time on crime: Motivation, generativity and agency in Irish probationers. *Probation Journal*, *55*(1), 25–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550507085676

Heidemann, G., Cederbaum, J. A., Martinez, S., & LeBel, T. P. (2016). Wounded healers: How formerly incarcerated women help themselves by helping others. *Punishment & Society*, *18*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474515623101

Henshaw, M., Bartels, L., & Hopkins, A. (2019). To commit is just the beginning: Applying therapeutic jurisprudence to reform parole in Australia. *University of New South Wales Law Journal, The*, *42*(4), 1411–1442.

Hine, L., Meyer, S., McDermott, L., & Eggins, E. (2022). Intervention programme for fathers who use domestic and family violence: Results from an evaluation of Caring Dads. *Child & Family Social Work*, *27*(4), 711–724. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12919

Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. (1983). Age and the explanation of crime. *American Journal of Sociology*, *89*(3), 552–584. https://doi.org/10.1086/227905

Klingele, C. (2019). Measuring Change: From Rates of Recidivism to Markers of Desistance. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology (1973-)*, *109*(4), 769–817.

Kunstler, B. E., Smith, L., Langmead, C. J., Goodwin, D. M., Wright, B., & Hatty, M. A. (2023). "We don't want to run before we walk": The attitudes of Australian stakeholders towards using psychedelics for mental health conditions. *Public Health Research & Practice*, *33*(3). https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/we-dont-want-to-run-before-we-walk-the-attitudes-of-australian-st

Laub, J. H., Nagin, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (1998). Trajectories of change in criminal offending: Good marriages and the desistance process. *American Sociological Review*, 225–238.

Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (1993). Turning points in the life course: Why change matters to the study of crime. *Criminology*, *31*(3), 301–325. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1993.tb01132.x

Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2001). Understanding Desistance from Crime. *Crime and Justice*, *28*, 1–69. https://doi.org/10.1086/652208

LeBel, T. P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., & Bushway, S. (2008). Thechicken and egg'of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, *5*(2), 131–159.

LeBel, T. P., Richie, M., & Maruna, S. (2015). Helping Others as a Response to Reconcile a Criminal Past: The Role of the Wounded Healer in Prisoner Reentry Programs. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *42*(1), 108–120. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854814550029

Lenkens, M., Van Lenthe, F. J., Schenk, L., Sentse, M., Severiens, S., Engbersen, G., & Nagelhout, G. E. (2024). Experiential peer support and desistance from crime: A systematic realist literature review. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, *30*(10), 1421–1451. https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2023.2203925

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Link, N. W., Ward, J. T., & Stansfield, R. (2019). Consequences of mental and physical health for reentry and recidivism: Toward a health-based model of desistance*. *Criminology*, *57*(3), 544–573. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12213

Malvaso, C., Day, A., Cale, J., Hackett, L., Delfabbro, P., & Ross, S. (2022). Adverse childhood experiences and trauma among young people in the youth justice system. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, *651*, 1–19.

Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives.* American Psychological Association.

Maruna, S. (2010). Mixed Method Research in Criminology: Why Not Go Both Ways? In A. R. Piquero & D. Weisburd (Eds.), *Handbook of Quantitative Criminology* (pp. 123–140). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-77650-7_7

Maruna, S., & Ramsden, D. (2004). Living to Tell the Tale: Redemption Narratives, Shame Management, and Offender Rehabilitation. In *Healing plots: The narrative basis of psychotherapy* (pp. 129–151). American Psychological Association Books.

Maruna, S., & Roy, K. (2007). Amputation or reconstruction? Notes on the concept of "knifing off" and desistance from crime. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *23*(1), 104–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986206298951

McAra, L., & McVie, S. (2022). *Causes and impact of offending and criminal justice pathways: Follow-up of the Edinburgh study cohort at age 35*. https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/causes-and-impact-of-offending-and-criminal-justice-pathways-foll

McCausland, R., & Baldry, E. (2023). Who does Australia Lock Up? The Social Determinants of Justice. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, *12*(3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.2504

McNeill, F. (2016). Desistance and criminal justice in Scotland. In H. Croall, G. Mooney, & M. Munro (Eds.), *Crime, Justice and Society in Scotland* (pp. 200–216). Routledge.

McNeill, F., Farrall, S., Lightowler, C., & Maruna, S. (2012). How and why people stop offending: Discovering desistance. *Insights Evidence Summary to Support Social Services in Scotland*.

McNeill, F., & Maruna, S. (2007). Giving up and giving back: Desistance, generativity and social work with offenders. In G. McIvor & P. Raynor (Eds.), *Developments in social work with offenders* (Vol. 48, pp. 224–339). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Nishar, S., Brumfield, E., Mandal, S., Vanjani, R., & Soske, J. (2023). "It's a revolving door": Understanding the social determinants of mental health as experienced by formerly incarcerated people. *Health & Justice*, *11*(1), 26. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-023-00227-8

Nixon, S. (2020). 'Giving back and getting on with my life': Peer mentoring, desistance and recovery of ex-offenders. *Probation Journal*, *67*(1), 47–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550519900249

Norman, M., Sonoda, J., & Ricciardelli, R. (2024). Sport, Physical Activity, and Young People Who Are Incarcerated: A Scoping Review. *Youth Justice*, *24*(2), 313–336. https://doi.org/10.1177/14732254231220594

Paternoster, R., & Bushway, S. (2009). Desistance and the" feared self": Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, *99*(4), 1103–1156.

Porporino, F. J. (2010). Bringing sense and sensitivity to corrections: From programmes to 'fix'offenders to services to support desistance. *What Else Works*, 61–85.

Poynton, S., Boiteux, S., & Ringland, C. (2023). People with disability and offending in NSW: Results from the National Disability Data Asset pilot. *Bureau Brief*. https://anrows.intersearch.com.au/anrowsjspui/handle/1/22298

Rocque, M. (2015). The lost concept: The (re) emerging link between maturation and desistance from crime. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, *15*(3), 340–360.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Rodermond, E., Kruttschnitt, C., Slotboom, A.-M., & Bijleveld, C. C. (2016). Female desistance: A review of the literature. *European Journal of Criminology*, *13*(1), 3–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370815597251

Rogers, J., Williams, K., Laurens, K. R., Berthelsen, D., Carpendale, E., Bentley, L., & Briant, E. (2025). *Footprints in Time Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children: Primary School Report*. Queensland University of Technology. https://eprints.qut.edu.au/235509

Rossner, M., Bartels, L., Gelb, K., Wong, G., Payne, J., & Scott-Palmer, S. (2022). *ACT Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List: Process and Outcome Evaluation Final Report*. ANU.

Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2023). *Volume 8—Criminal justice and people with disability.* Australian Government.

Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (2003). Life-course desisters? Trajectories of crime among delinquent boys followed to age 70. *Criminology*, *41*(3), 555–592. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2003.tb00997.x

Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (2005). A life-course view of the development of crime. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *602*(1), 12–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716205280075

Skardhamar, T., & Savolainen, J. (2014). Changes in criminal offending around the time of job entry: A study of employment and desistance. *Criminology*, *52*(2), 263–291. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12037

Smith, J., McGrath, A., Spaccavento, B., & Mahajan, Y. (2025). Factors differentiating between incarcerated men and women in New South Wales, Australia. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2025.2465270

Sotiri, M., McCausland, R., Reeve, R., Phelan, L., & Byrnes, T. (2021). *"They're there to support you and help you, they're not there to judge you" Breaking the cycle of incarceration, drug use and release: Evaluation of the Community Restorative Centre's AOD and reintegration programs*. UNSW.

Sotiri, M., & Schetzer, L. (2024). *Post-release, re-entry and breaking cycles of disadvantage and imprisonment*. Justice Reform Initiative.

Taylor, H., & Bartels, L. (2025). 'Somewhere We Can Call Home and…Be Normal': Findings From the Justice Housing Programme Evaluation. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, ajs4.70025. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.70025

Taylor, H., Bartels, L., Rehill, P., Wong, G., & Liu, E. (2023). *Process evaluation of the Justice Housing Program*. Australian National Univeristy.

Ugelvik, T. (2022). The Transformative Power of Trust: Exploring Tertiary Desistance in Reinventive Prisons. *The British Journal of Criminology*, *62*(3), 623–638. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab076

Van Ginneken, E. (2015). The role of hope in preparation for release from prison. *Prison Service Journal*, *220*(1), 10–15.

Van Ginneken, E. (2017). Constrained Agency: The Role of Self-Control in the Process of Desistance. In E. L. Hart & E. Van Ginneken (Eds.), *New Perspectives on Desistance* (pp. 241–265). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95185-7_11

Vaughan, B. (2006). The internal narrative of desistance. *The British Journal of Criminology*, *47*(3), 390–404. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azl083

Vieraitis, L. M., Kovandzic, T. V., & Marvell, T. B. (2002). The criminogenic effects of imprisonment: Evidence from state panel data, 1974–2002. *Criminology & Public Policy*, *6*(3), 589–622. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2007.00456.x

Villeneuve, M., F.-Dufour, I., & Farrall, S. (2021). Assisted Desistance in Formal Settings: A Scoping Review. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, *60*(1), 75–100. https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12396

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

CABINET

Visher, C. A., Winterfield, L., & Coggeshall, M. B. (2005). Ex-offender employment programs and recidivism: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, *1*(3), 295–316. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-005-8127-x

Warr, M. (1998). Life-course transitions and desistance from crime. *Criminology*, *36*(2), 183–216. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1998.tb01246.x

Weaver, B. (2012). The relational context of desistance: Some implications and opportunities for social policy. *Social Policy & Administration*, *46*(4), 395–412. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2012.00840.x

Weaver, B., & McNeill, F. (2015). Lifelines: Desistance, social relations, and reciprocity. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *42*(1), 95–107. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854814550031

Woods, M. (2020). 'Helping Others and Helping Myself': Wounded Healers as Peer Workers. *Irish Probation Journal*, *17*. https://www.pbni.org.uk/files/pbni/2022-06/Irish%20Probation%20Journal%20Volume%20seventeen%202020.pdf#page=193

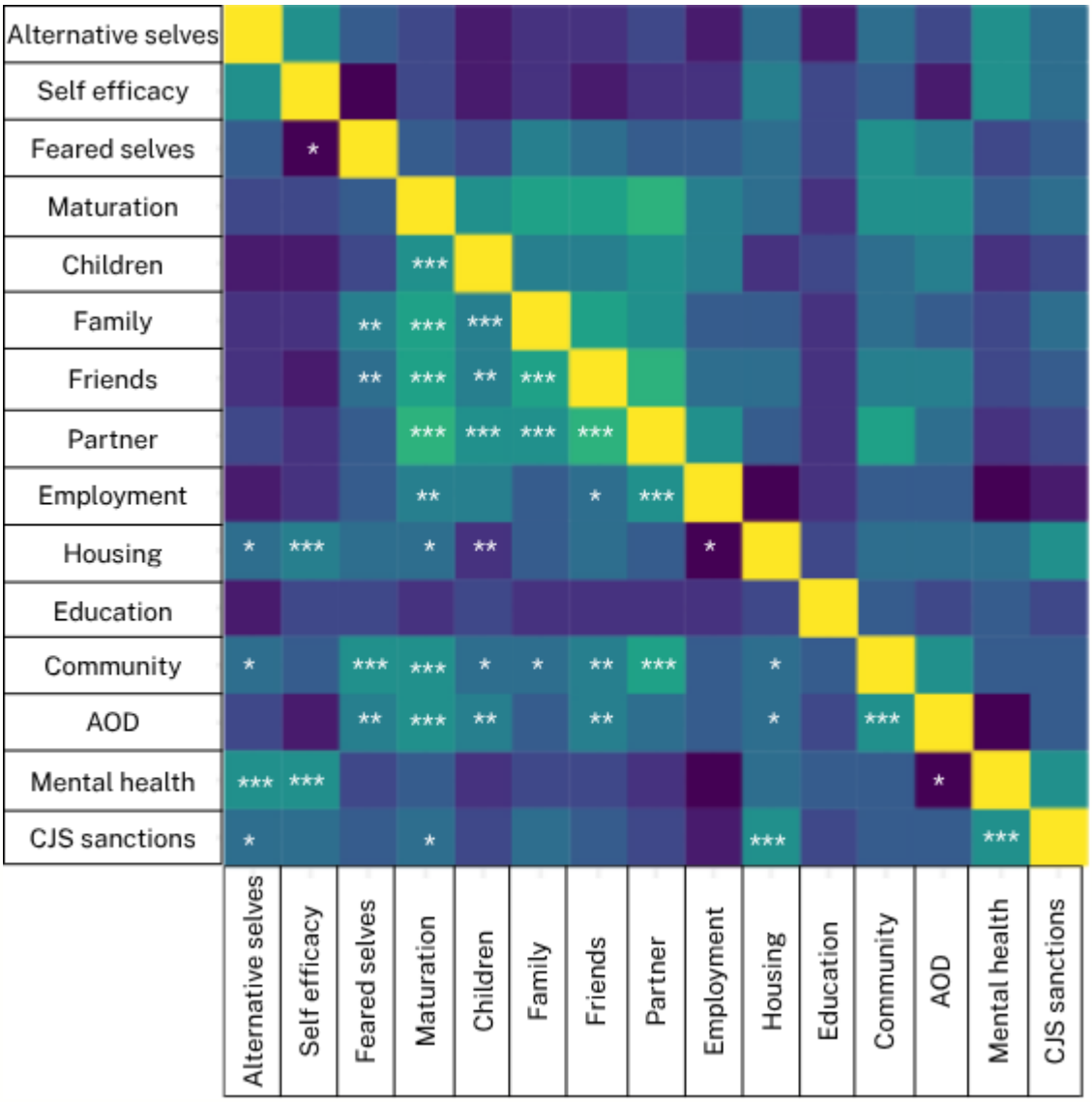
Workman, A., & Liamputtong, P. (2024). Critical Whiteness in Criminal Justice Systems. In *Handbook of Critical Whiteness: Deconstructing Dominant Discourses Across Disciplines* (pp. 343–347). Springer.

Yao, Y., Guo, D., Lu, T.-S., Liu, F.-L., Huang, S.-H., Diao, M.-Q., Li, S.-X., Zhang, X.-J., Kosten, T. R., & Shi, J. (2024). Efficacy and safety of psychedelics for the treatment of mental disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychiatry Research*, *335*, 115886.

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET

10. Appendix A: Heat maps

Figure A1: Heat map of correlations between catalysts for change



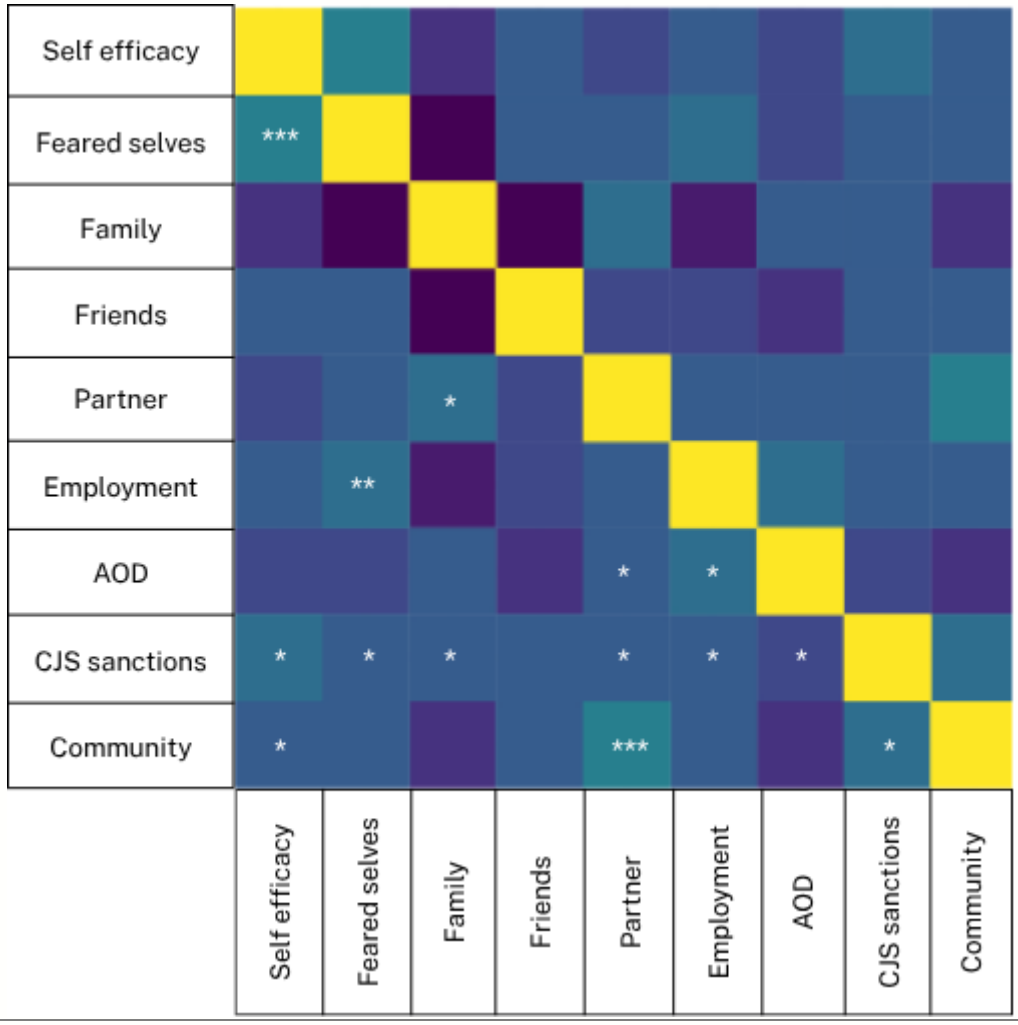
Note: CJS = criminal justice system. Lighter colours relate to higher positive correlations, while darker colours correlate with lower levels of negative correlations. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

CABINET

CABINET

Figure A2: Heat map of correlations between barriers to desistance



Note: CJS = criminal justice system. Lighter colours relate to higher positive correlations, while darker colours correlate with lower levels of negative correlations. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Source: Pathways out of the Criminal Justice System project, 2025 [Computer file]

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University) | CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C
CABINET