

**Hidden Pathways:**  
**A Study into the Desistance Process of African American Male Violence Prevention**  
**Workers**

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DISSERTATION

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*“Everyone who remembers his own education remembers teachers, not methods techniques. The teacher is the heart of the educational system.” – Sidney Hook*

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## **Summary**

This qualitative study explored African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention and who reside in the city of Chicago desistance from crime process. It was conducted from February 2020 through August of 2020. The purpose of the study was to explore the authentic shared experiences of participants and deepen our understanding of their desistance process.

It is important to note, I am an individual with similar lived experiences as the participants and rest on the inside of the insider and outsider continuum. This study sought to explore the research question: How do marginalized African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention and who reside in the city of Chicago understand their desistance from crime? The limited current body of literature exploring desistance among marginalized African American ex-offenders working in violence prevention convinced me that it would be most appropriate to employ qualitative interviewing using an interpretive constructionist perspective. The conceptual framework collectively with the research design created an opportunity to permit the voices of marginalized African ex-offenders who work in violence prevention in urban settings to be heard.

Qualitative interviewing was necessary to understand what the desistance process looked like for African American male ex-offenders in marginalized communities on Chicago's west side, and to discover how they defined successful desistance. Qualitative interviewing using an interpretive constructionist perspective allowed me to understand and describe the processes, conditions, challenges, culture, and the participants' definition of 'successfully' abstaining from breaking the law. While qualitative methods seek to capture the rich complexities of social worlds and

individual lived experiences, it is also grounded in human behavior and seeks to understand why people act in a particular manner (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

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## **1. Introduction**

In America, the impact of systemic oppression and marginalization of African American communities has created a seamless pipeline that leads to incarceration. The attack on African American inner-city communities has been identified through a long history of social and economic deprivations (disinvestment in communities, food deserts, poor funding for community schools, few if any public libraries, vacant lots, boarded up store fronts, and high unemployment) along with racial profiling, poor community and police relations, police brutality, and police excessive force which in many cases have resulted in death. These structures have created norms in impoverished African American communities that are deemed criminal in mainstream society yet are viewed as a way of survival for residents of those communities. The combination of systematic racism and disinvestment has caused residents in these urban communities to experience perpetual traumatization that for the most part goes untreated and feeds into cycles of harm with the typical result being that of mass incarceration. Therefore, there is a non-proportional rate of African American men in the United States prisons, they represent 13.4 % of the U.S. population and 34% of the total prison population (Bronson, J. & Carson, E, 2019).

Furthermore, the criminal justice system has done little to support marginalized African American males who return to communities that are heavily populated with ex-offenders<sup>1</sup>, seen in both the United States and England (Glynn, 2018). The multiple traumas manifest prior to criminality arguably feed into the casual process of criminalization, compounded during

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of definitions of terms, I have chosen to adopt ‘ex-offender’ because it signifies an act or several acts of an individual that was law breaking. It is my belief that the term is less offensive for the individual and less stigmatizing than other terms used in the literature such as returning citizens, justice-involved individuals, felon, or ex-prisoner.

imprisonment, and then continues once an individual has returned from prison or jail to a marginalized community, as posited by Glynn (2018). Therefore, there exists a need to understand more deeply how individuals who go through this process successfully travel down the path of desistance. Given the material and cultural differences between communities, and the racial disparities experienced within processes of criminalization, the desistance process is likely to look very different, for these ex-offenders in marginalized communities in comparison to their counterparts in comparatively advantaged, predominately white, more stable communities. The dichotomy of desistance for ex-offenders in marginalized communities and advantaged communities differ in population, culture, and resources. However, the literature on desistance has focused primarily on the relatively advantaged communities and less on the marginalized communities to which most ex-offenders return.

My doctoral research examined the long-term patterns of desistance among young marginalized African American males who currently work in violence prevention and who reside in one of three Chicago communities, North Lawndale, East Garfield, and Austin. I was especially interested in the self-narratives regarding ‘success’ and how these crucial identity questions manifest within the lives of formerly incarcerated and marginalized men who return to communities that have been marginalized and debilitated by socio-economic factors and where heavy surveillance by law enforcement is apparent (Miller, 2014). There was a need for this study because the literature does not adequately account for desistance as it relates to this population nor does it consider the specific challenges ex-prisoners face upon returning to these communities – particularly with regard to racial factors, along with the unique history of race relations in America, the impact of which is still omnipresent. There is a need for greater

engagement with the lived experiences of African American men (and women) who are leaving prison and attempting to desist.

At the time of the writing of this dissertation, the world is witnessing a level of racial unrest and consciousness not seen in the United States since the Civil Rights movement of the mid-20th Century. The murders of George Floyd, Amhaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor by police officers among others demonstrated their implicit bias and the gaping racial inequities of the United States' criminal justice system (Blake, 2020). Consistently, police officers were given the benefit of the doubt when a potential crime took place that they acted in good faith and were rarely held to the same standards as other citizens. Additionally, COVID-19 had a profound impact on the disproportionately African American prison populations. The treatment of prisoners in county, state and federal facilities have been a public disgrace; close quarters, poor hygienic conditions, and limited healthcare resources lead to the rapid spread of COVID-19 within prisons (Armstrong, 2020). This institutional racism at the hands of the state demonstrates the urgency of desistance-related work in African American communities. The horrendous contempt that the American justice system has shown towards Black people must end. While the international Black Lives Matter protest movement has helped Black people demand public accountability from police, much work is yet to be done at many different levels; finding methods through which Black men can avoid recidivism is one such undertaking. Creating a greater body of knowledge regarding the process of desistance in African American communities offers a means of helping Black men out of the perpetual cycle of incarceration. It is my profound hope that my work and the personal accounts of the subjects I studied meaningfully impact the lives of African American ex-offenders.

The focus of this study was the desistance narratives of marginalized African American males who currently work in violence prevention and who reside in Chicago communities that are heavily impacted by socio-economic marginalization (e.g., high crime rates, high unemployment, poverty, lack of resources, and saturation of ex-offenders) (Miller, 2014). Prior research on desistance neglects to address the experiences and processes of desistance from crime, specifically pertaining to marginalized African American males who currently work in violence prevention and who reside in the inner city of Chicago. In addition, there exists ambiguity in the manner that desistance is defined by researchers. Maruna (2001) stated, “The lack of a clear definition of just the thing we hope to understand. It might be that the model of desistance used in research literature to date has hindered our understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 22). In addition, there was a need to further examine the pains associated with desistance that includes discussion of the ‘prison to the streets continuum.’ My study attempted to address these issues by examining African American male ex-offenders who have successfully desisted in Chicago. I allowed the participants an opportunity to provide their own understanding of the meaning and processes of desistance and the pains associated with it.

As previously stated, the study will take place in three of the seven (Austin, East Garfield, Englewood, West Englewood, North Lawndale, South Lawndale, and West Humboldt Park) Chicago communities to which the majority of ex-prisoners return (Miller, 2014). These specific communities were chosen due to their spatial proximity and their location on the west side of Chicago. This is particularly important because I am a native of the Austin area with strong social networks and community ties, and will be allowed to utilize my insider positionality in recruiting participants and analyzing the data.

This study addressed gaps in knowledge by exploring the manner in which African American male ex-offenders defined desistance and particularly *success*. The study is significant because the definition of desistance for the group of male ex-offenders in these discrete geographical and socio-cultural communities is not represented comprehensively in the literature and certainly not by the desisters themselves. Furthermore, I attempted to contribute to the understanding of desistance in homogenous minority communities that are plagued with violence and crime. Finally, the study explored the pains of desistance, which included discussion of the *prison to the streets continuum*, where questions of masculinity become pertinent, particularly as gender performance is constructed within African American frameworks – including the historical strains of racism that have contributed to these constructions. I was particularly attentive to the emerging literature on these so-called *pains of desistance*, since it opened-up rich lines of inquiry and posed relevant questions regarding my doctoral project, also noted by Curtis (2014), (Glynn, 2013, 2018), and Nugent and Schinkel (2016).

My research found the self-narratives and definitions of African American desisters as central to the analysis. The second part of this study addressed this in detail; it provides an outline of both the general and more technical aspects of my methodology. Additionally, I reflected on the ethical components of the project, highlighting my positionality as an ‘insider’ and the possible implications this identity carries – both practical and ethical. As a precursor to this discussion, in the first part of this work I identified the research questions that determined the choice of research methods for this study.

This paper conducted a qualitative multi-community study to explore the following research question:

1. What does the desistance process look like in the first three years after leaving prison for marginalized African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention in the Austin, East Garfield, and North Lawndale communities of Chicago?

This broad starting point includes various subsidiary and more granular questions including:

2. Where does the desistance literature identify sociogenic, maturation, and identity-based models to explain this process of abstinence from crime for the stated population?
3. How do these dimensions (separately and/or together) relate to the desistance process among marginalized African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention?
4. What role does institutional and/or interpersonal racism play in the desistance process?

The structure of the work is as follows: first part (a) a review of the relevant literature; part (b) presents a research method to address the gaps identified in the literature; part (c) outlines the research aims and questions of the study; part (d) details the study's methods and analysis procedures; part (e) detail the data pertinent to the research; and part (f) analyze and discuss the findings.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section surveys the current desistance research, identifying the theoretical and practical ground that may prove fertile for future research. Beginning with a discussion of definitional problems, Part One explores the three most studied accounts of desistance: (1) the importance of maturation in the desistance process, (2) the sociogenic factors relating to desistance, including more recent attempts to develop a ‘relational paradigm’ (Weaver, 2014, 2015), and (3) identity-based theories of desistance. In Part Two of this review I examined the literature on the pains of desistance, which includes discussion of what might be called the ‘prison to the streets continuum’. Lastly, in Part Three I review the themes that emerged from the research that was not anticipated and speaks specifically to this population’s desistance process.

### *Definitional Nuances*

Desistance theories attempt to explain the crime free gap ex-offenders have in their criminal career, and how these past offenders change their identity to non-offenders (Bottoms et al., 2004). The different approaches to examining desistance has made it difficult for scholars to agree on a definition of desistance, the exact processes involved in behavior/lifestyle change from law-breaking to law-abiding, or what causes career offenders to desist from crime. Broadly, desistance means to stop, cease, refrain, or abstain a pattern of criminal activity (Bottoms et al., 2004). According to Devers (2011), “Most theorists recognize that desistance is a multifaceted process for offenders who have continually engaged in criminal behavior” (p. 2). It is possible this perspective has led to the variety of theoretical models proposed, as discussed below. In my study, it is particularly important not to co-op these definitions uncritically; rather I captured the definition among the group of ex-offenders in my target neighborhoods because it has not been adequately defined or represented in the literature, and certainly not by the desisters themselves. Miller (2014) stated, “In states like Illinois, where over 45,000 prisoners are detained annually,

there is an almost 1:1 ratio of inmates admitted and discharged, the vast majority of which return to just seven of the 77 Chicago community areas” (p. 314). Definitions have the power to affect policy, perspective, and the way people engage with a population, which is why it is critical to give these Chicago communities an opportunity to define desistance (Miller, 2014).

The research of desistance theory is closely related to rehabilitation of offenders’ theories. However, rehabilitation differs from desistance in a number of ways. First, it focuses on a medical model. Second, it is historically and primarily (though not only) concerned with processes or practices that are done *to* rather than *with* people with convictions. Third, it often occurs in penal contexts (i.e., under the auspices of prison administrators, probation officers, courts, etc.). Last, it often begins from a *weakness-based* rather than a *strengths-based* position (Maruna, Immarigeon, & LaBel, 2004). By contrast, Maruna et al. (2004) stated, “The study of desistance, in fact originally emerged out of something of a critique of the professionally driven ‘medical model’ of corrections. To explore desistance was to study those people who change without the assistance of correctional interventions” (p. 11).

#### *The Process versus the Termination View of Desistance*

An additional challenge to definitions of desistance relates to questions of time: how long the process takes and, crucially, at what point a person can be considered a successful desister. The consensus view among theorists is that desistance is a process rather than a binary state, one that involves a decline in criminal activity gradually over a period of unspecified time, and may include many stops and starts. This makes it difficult to determine precisely when or whether a person has desisted from crime permanently. Maruna (2001) posited desistance as a “maintenance process” that is exhibited when a person who has committed crimes over a long period of time has a lapse in offending; and maintains that offenders desist often throughout their



criminal career. Laub and Sampson (2001) suggested that desistance is the casual process that eventually leads to termination of criminal behavior. Similarly, Fagan (1989) suggested that desistance is defined as a process in which the consistency in criminal behavior decreases over time until true desistance manifests and the offender aborts deviancy altogether.

There is, however, some dispute within the literature to this *process* view of desistance. Barnett, Blumstein, and Farrington (1987), for example, considered desistance in the life of a career criminal as a *sudden termination*. Other theorists have taken a similar approach by suggesting that desistance can only manifest the moment that a criminal career ends (Farrall & Bowling, 1999), or when offenders discontinue participation in serious criminal activity (Shover, 1996). Farrington and Hawkins (1991) proposed desistance is having no criminal convictions between the age of twenty-one and thirty-two.) There exist significant implications for policy and practice to how desistance relates to time. Indeed, the termination point has been a topic of debate for criminologists precisely because of the possibility, if not in many cases the probability, of relapse, and the intervals that occur during the life span of a career criminal (Maruna, 2001). In other words, if a binary/termination approach is adopted, there is less room for, and less recognition more generally, for temporary mistakes. The potential for punitive reactions to errors becomes that much greater. We see evidence of this in the re-criminalization of individuals who, for example, break their parole license conditions – even while they understand themselves as making sincere efforts towards desistance. McNeil (2018) suggested, “the effects of supervision are often diffuse – they pervade the lives of the supervisees – and that even when experienced as helpful, they hurt” (p. 4).

Further conceptualizations of desistance are those, which conform to the *process* view. LeBlanc and Frechette (1989) argue that desistance consists of four phases: de-escalation,

deceleration, reaching a ceiling, and specialization. De-escalation is the initial phase when offenders begin taking less risk by reducing the severity of their criminal behavior. Afterwards, deceleration takes place when the offender's criminal acts decline. The third phase of desistance, the ceiling, suggests an offender has reached his peak of criminal activity and begins to decline in his involvement with crime. Lastly, specialization is the phase of desistance that emphasizes an individual offender becoming more skilled and focused on a particular crime that eventually leads to desisting from other crimes. LeBlanc and Frechette's framework implies a much less punitive and much more cognizant view of the material realities of people's lives (and human nature). For example, some ex-offenders progress in the desistance process but battle with substance abuse. Although they deviate from their previous criminal behavior the technical violation of alcohol or drug usage can be viewed as relapse in the termination desistance perspective (Which iteration or combination of iterations are you most interested in?).

For the purposes of this thesis, I used Maruna's (2001) model of desistance; I felt that Maruna's (2001) concept allowed for a great range of material markers of desistance to be analyzed, while simultaneously possessing a concrete narrative arc which my subjects intuitively understood without difficulty. Maruna (2001) has divided desistance into two parts: primary and secondary desistance. Primary desistance is the initial act of desisting by an offender. In addition, primary desistance is a lull or short pause in criminal behavior. Furthermore, some scholars view primary desistance as a decrease in the severity of criminal behavior (Healy, 2010). An example would be a person convicted of armed robbery involved in identity theft or bank fraud. On the other hand, secondary desistance is the ability of an offender to maintain a pro-social life free of crime for a specified period of time (King, 2013). Secondary desistance is a more permanent termination of criminal behavior with the intent of abstinence for the duration of an ex-offender's

life (McNeil & Maruna, 2007). However, the literature suggests there is always the possibility of relapse (Sampson & Laub, 2007). Therefore, researchers who look at desistance through a life course lens believe the only way to truly determine if a person desisted or not is to examine their life once they have died (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

The question of *how* desistance from crime occurs is no less complicated or debated than the question of *what* exactly it is. The following sections provide an overview of the three general models that have been used by way of explanation: the maturation process; the sociogenic model; and, the identity-based model.

#### *Desistance and the Maturation Process*

The Glueck (1940) research represents the beginning point of the desistance literature...it was the data Sampson and Laub (1993) referenced to develop their life course theory, upon which many desistance theorists later drew upon to build and extend subsequent frameworks. The longitudinal research of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1940) compared a matched sample of 500 delinquent boys and 500 boys who were considered non-delinquent that lived in a socio-economically oppressed area in Boston. The results from the Glueck's research suggested that age, marriage, and employment were key predictors of desistance for the 500 delinquent boys. The data they collected along with their findings inspired subsequent researchers to develop what is known as the life course theory, which is a theoretical framework for understanding desistance (Sampson & Laub 1993). Sampson and Laub (2005) utilized the data collected by the Glueck's, combined it with Hirshi's (1998) theoretical perspective of social bonds (described in detail in the following section) and posited their age-graded theory. Sampson and Laub (2005) agreed with Hirshi (1998) that social bonds played a significant role in desistance; however, more importantly Sampson and Laub (2005) suggested age was the key element to desistance because

it allowed the offender to obtain social capital. Their argument was built on the premise that most adolescents commit some form of deviance, however at eighteen structural factors come into play such as marriage, employment, and having children, which produce social capital in the life of the offender causing him to desist (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Laub and Sampson (1993) stated:

Our thesis concerns adult behavior and how it is influenced not just by early life experiences, but also social ties to the adult institutions of informal social control (such as family, school, and work). We argue that the trajectories of both crime and conformity are significantly influenced over the life course by these adult social bonds, regardless of prior individual differences in self-control or criminal propensity... changes that strengthen social bonds to society in adulthood will lead to less crime and deviance (p. 313).

The age-graded theory indicates that the maturation of the offender enables the individual to feel the full benefit of social bonds, which then becomes an important aid to desistance (Devers, 2011). Broadly, in line with this thinking, though concerned with integrating the three major strands of desistance theory, McNeil (2006) concludes:

Thus, desistance resides somewhere in the interface between developing personal maturity, changing social bonds associated with certain life transitions and the individual subjective narrative constructions which build around these key events and changes. (p. 47)

Significantly, Sampson and Laub's (1992, 1993, 2005) research does not include African American males from marginalized communities within the sample. I have yet to identify any research in the literature that addresses this population, or these communities and I am unaware if any exist. As a result, the effect of maturation to the desistance process for this demographic of men is unknown. I would speculate that given the particular racial dynamics at play, marginalized African American men who are returning to communities of high concentration crime and high unemployment and saturated with ex-offenders, may face additional challenges compared to their white and relatively more advantaged counterparts that to some extent mitigate

the positive benefits of maturation.<sup>2</sup> Chamberlain and Wallace (2016) state, “The concentration of ex-offenders in particular areas limits their access to pro-social ties and increases the likelihood that they will associate with other ex-offenders, a factor known to contribute to recidivism and consequently, neighborhood crime” (p. 913). The challenges experienced in marginalized communities characterized by the extreme lack of opportunity make it difficult to obtain social capital despite reaching a certain age (Chamberlain & Wallace, 2016). In addition, we must not negate the racial hierarchy, systemic oppression, and caste system in America when attempting to compare rural poor white communities and African American inner-city marginalized communities. Testing this proposition is an area for future research.

#### *The Sociogenic Model: Desistance and Social Bonds*

Each desistance framework agrees that age plays a significant role in the process of desistance; however, Hirshi’s (1972) theory emphasized the importance of establishing social bonds (i.e., involvement, belief, attachment, & commitment) during adolescence. The sociogenic model requires a dynamic between individual agency, external structures or factors, and institutional and social systems (Hirshi, 1972). This model contrasted with Laub and Sampson’s (2001) view, which maintains that social bonds are contingent upon an offender reaching a certain age (eighteen).

Hirshi (1972) developed the argument that criminal activity is directly connected to the pro-social bonds a person has to society by highlighting a rather pessimistic reality to which all human beings are subject. His position is grounded on the belief that all people are flawed, by nature and are thus capable of committing crime, we therefore need as a corollary strong social relationship both as a support and to act as informal controls. Hirshi (1972) stated “Given that

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<sup>2</sup> Significant research gap focused on maturation as it relates to this demographic.

man is an animal, ‘impulsivity’ and aggressiveness can be seen as a natural consequence of freedom from restraints” (p. 18). The theory, while problematic, rightly implies a connectedness to society is essential to restrain these impulses. Therefore, pro-social and law-abiding structures must exist in a dynamic with personal agency for an individual to successfully desist from crime.

Contrary to age-graded theory, social bond theory posits bonds can be established at any time during the life of an offender. Whereas age-graded theory suggests successful desistance depends on human development through time in addition to these external social factors. More recent work within this sociogenic model includes research that advances an explicitly relational paradigm. A study regarding the effect of higher education on ex-offenders elicited results that indicate the simple act of being on a university campus provided opportunities for relational connections with potential allies, thereby increasing the ex-offenders support system (Runell, 2018). Weaver (2015) in particular offers a targeted analysis of the significance of positive relationships to help support transformation, and therefore desistance. The previous statement may appear to be simplistic, but it is much more complex when you consider various factors of some ex-offenders, including career offending, gang participation, family members active in criminal behavior, and residing in a community with high crime rates and high unemployment (Glynn, 2013). Chamberlain and Wallace (2016) suggest that because of the bonds they establish during their incarceration, ex-offenders who serve prison terms develop relationships with people in prison who return to their community. The majority of the ex-offenders in Illinois return to one of seven communities that are heavily saturated with ex-offenders who have exited prison (Miller, 2014).

Building on Donati’s (2014) relational theory of sociology, Weaver (2014) suggested that the nature and quality of relationships between people is at the center of the desistance process.

Weaver (2014) posited that reciprocal relationships are the key to understanding individual and collective change. Runell (2018) asserted that ex-offenders who are able to view themselves as mentors and give back to at-risk individuals will assist them in their continued desistance. This basic contention is compelling. However, there lies a racial dynamic at play when considering the desistance processes of African American male ex-offenders, which is somewhat absent from the literature. These marginalized men are typically released into communities with high rates of crime, high incidences of gang activity, blocked opportunities, and often low social standing (Miller, 2014). Yet, despite these obstacles and constraints, some of these marginalized men are still able to desist from crime. One avenue of interest is to understand how this relational paradigm might be applied to African American men presented with these specific socio-economic, cultural, and historical challenges.

Weaver (2014) argued that interactions are imbedded in a cultural and structure context. The environment has established norms that affect and influence the manner in which both people act in a relationship (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, the social structures that influence individuals play an important role in the desistance process. This argument represents a gap in the literature when you consider the social norms in vulnerable communities heavily impacted by socio-economic factors. These communities are anti-establishment due to centuries of being marginalized, enduring racism, and facing the criminalization of African American people out of proportion to others in the criminal justice system (Boggess & Hipp, 2010; Glynn, 2013).

The relational paradigm is critical in the desistance process and as the literature suggested there is a reciprocal nature involved between the two individuals (Donati, 2006). This study seeks to understand how marginalized ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention return to these vulnerable communities and continue to maintain seemingly negative

relationships with community residents and yet desist from crime. Also, it is important to note the literature does state the powerful impact relationships forged within the context of religion via worship service, community outings, and religious study class contribute to the desistance process. Therefore, this study will unpack many nuances involved in the desistance process for marginalized African American men who currently work in violence prevention, men that have not been considered in the literature and represents a gap in knowledge.

### *The Identity-Based Model: Desistance and the Narrative Turn*

The third theoretical approach taken by desistance theorists can be termed the identity-based model. This position holds that a process of change (from *offender* to *desister*) involves an internal shift in an individual's thinking such that a significant transformation is made allowing an individual to move away from crime. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) assert the 'hard' view, which is to say, they view individual agency as not only paramount to the desistance process but the first necessary step to change. Desistance is, they argue, the "result of the offender willfully changing his identity and both working toward something positive in the future and steering away from something feared" (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1108). In another vein, and representing the 'soft' view, Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph's (2002) approach to desistance was to purpose the theory of cognitive transformation, which holds that both internal and external factors are necessary for desistance-promoting identity changes. An exploratory study conducted by Runell (2018) is an example of the way higher education (external factor) promotes personal success (internal factor) to eliminate imposed stigmas related to ex-offenders (external factor). Unlike Paternoster and Bushway, these theorists consider the interaction between cognitive processes and various social contingencies to work in conjunction. They frame cognitive transformation as involving four cognitive shifts in the thinking of the offender:



basic openness to change, exposure to a hook or set of hooks for change (new positive environment, wife, job, or school), the ability to envision and see oneself in a different, more positive light, and changes to the way an individual views crime and its rewards (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002). For example, the ability to obtain a position in social work and therefore view societal stigmas in a way that supports others (Runell, 2018). There are methodological difficulties in terms of establishing empirical support for these cognition shifts and the interaction with external factors that Giordano et al. (2002) considered necessary.

More promisingly, Maruna (2001), in his influential book *Making Good*, built upon the foundation and adopted a more narrative approach to the identity-based model of desistance. He emphasized what he termed the *life script*. Self-narrative life scripts suggest the offender makes a radical decision to desist by way of re-framing the story an individual tells about themselves to themselves. In this way, an individual can shift in his thoughts and behavior from a *criminalized script* to a more positive approach (Glynn, 2018). Once the story has been made more positive, the *redemption script*, the offender sees himself in a different, more positive light far different from the way he viewed himself before. Furthermore, he suggests that once people change their personal narrative in this way, they are able to assume a new identity, which subsequently makes them capable of maintaining a life free of crime.

Maruna's (2001) theory was developed based on extended qualitative interviews, which included rich biographical detail. He compared a group of desisters and persisters and found that a key difference (which he held to be the most significant factor for desistance) was that the desisting group had found ways to embrace elements of their past and reincorporate them into their present self-narrative. Maruna's (2001) work is also supported by Glynn's (2018) study of critical race theory and incarceration of African American males in which Glynn (2018) asserts

that when marginalized African American men who have experienced imprisonment have “the opportunity to ‘narrate’ and ‘interpret’ their ‘own reality by bringing coherence to their ‘real-life’ stories, it creates a ‘counter-narrative’ that” spurs desistance (p. 2). This stands in contrast to Paternoster and Bushway (2009) who stated “Desistance, when it occurs, generally involves a deliberate act of self-change, a ‘break with the past’ that occurs in a metaphorical and, in an analytical way” (p. 1107). Maruna suggested offenders do not transform into a new person, they utilize the prosocial views of themselves that were always in existence to offset their criminal mentality/behavior from the past.

Similar to the first two models discussed above, identity-based desistance research, while providing well supported insights fails to comprehensively speak to desistance as it relates to marginalized African American men. It is likely that many of the same narrative processes apply to this demographic. However, in terms of what precisely a movement from a ‘condemnation’ to a ‘redemption’ script means for this group, and how culturally and historically determined dynamics of race may be a factor in how ‘successful’ identity scripts are constructed, more research is needed.

### *The ‘Pains of Desistance’*

Nugent and Schinkel (2016) clarified how during the desistance process at different stages there are pains. These pains were associated with the concepts of primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance. Building on the work of Lermert (1950), Maruna and Farrall (2004) created the concepts of primary and secondary desistance to mirror primary and secondary deviance. Primary desistance refers to time when an individual is not offending; secondary desistance is when an individual no longer views himself as an offender; and tertiary desistance is others recognizing the change in an individual life and no longer views them as an offender (King,

2013). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) stated, “these terms delineate desistance in different spheres (the world outside, within ourselves, and in relation to others) rather than different times” (p. 570). The literature on desistance speaks in great detail about the pain and challenges associated with the maintenance of desistance. Maruna and Roy (2007) theorized the pain in changing and going straight for desisters and the loneliness associated with eliminating people and things in their lives.

Nugent and Schinkel (2016) introduced the term *act-desistance* for the period of non-offending, *identity desistance* for an individual self-identifying as non-offender, and the term *relational desistance* for others recognizing the positive change in an ex-offender. They considered this terminology more descriptive and distinctive, and it clearly shows the different aspects of desistance. In addition, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) identified and analyzed three distinctive pains of desistance in long-term imprisonment with career offenders and short-term incarceration with young adults, pain of isolation, pain of goal failure, and pain of hopelessness. In the study, men on supervision who served long sentences isolated themselves to avoid old friends who committed crimes, avoided police officers in their neighborhood who knew them, and eluded tempting risky situations (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). The pain in isolation is associated with loneliness and the desire for human connectedness. The pain of goal failure manifested after multiple unsuccessful attempts of procuring employment and denial of relational desistance at the meso and macro level. The combined pain from isolation and pain of goal failure results in the pain of hopelessness. The pain of hopelessness is cemented when the ex-offender accepts the plight in life that society has prescribed to him and no longer attempts to be ‘successful’.

In a study conducted by Williams's (2014), her interviews with participants regarding their motivations for staying out of prison, highlighted the importance of self-acceptance regarding past choices and how they may have led to present circumstances. Many of the participants shared reflective responses relating to a change in their personal identity, specifically that they were able to overcome their time in prison (Williams, 2014). The participants' responses in this study could be considered examples of the achievement of identity desistance, which allowed the ex-offenders to find success in society.

The findings suggested there exists an interdependence of act-desistance, identity desistance, and relational desistance; and without these three components 'true desistance' is not attainable (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Nugent and Schinkel (2016), similarly to Maruna and Roy (2007), posited the difficulty of eliminating old relationships and building new networks. The challenge of 'making good' by developing an alternative prosocial identity is extremely difficult for marginalized men who have limited options (Maruna, 2001). Hope is essential in all forms of desistance in particular when subscribing to the identity-based model. Runell's (2018) study regarding the effect of achieving success as a social service provider supports this idea that the individual is able to look beyond their own criminal identity and begin to see themselves as a benefit to their community.

Furthermore, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) added depth to the literature by using the terms act-desistance, identity desistance, and relational desistance. The previous terms developed in the literature by Maruna and Farrall (2004): primary desistance, secondary desistance, and tertiary desistance were ambiguous and suggested desistance was a linear process. Furthermore, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) made the literature richer by categorizing the different relational desistance levels micro – (immediate family and friends), meso – (community), and macro – (society).

### *The Prison and the Streets: A Continuum and the Role of Masculinity*

In this section, I wanted to develop some of the lines of theoretical reasoning identified above regarding *pains* by exploring the specific issue of masculinity, and what the emerging literature has to say on this topic. This is related to questions of identity and self-presentation and it is, arguably, a barrier to successful desistance to the extent that it creates pressures to perform certain roles that may be criminogenic – linked especially to violence, and to an inability to seek support or demonstrate vulnerabilities (Clear, 2007; Glynn, 2018). This issue of masculinity or *hyper* masculinity is not only an important component of identity (and the desistance process) once an individual has been released back into the community after a period of incarceration, it also manifests within the prison environment (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018). Many of the behaviors and self-narratives believed necessary within prison are experienced as similarly crucial as defensive mechanisms in the community as African American men who experienced imprisonment have an amplified sense, they were treated unfairly by the criminal justice system (Glynn, 2018). I would speculate that this is especially the case for African American men returning to marginalized neighborhoods (Clear, 2007). These marginalized men return to communities with many of the men they were incarcerated due to the saturation of ex-offenders in seven Chicago zip codes. Therefore, they are constantly triggered or reminded to maintain this expression of hyper-masculinity. Given the limited research in this area, it is a sub-topic I hope to explore further as part of my future research.

The literature on desistance suggested that male ex-offenders go through a complicated construction of different masculinity and identity expressions (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018). The research relies on Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* to describe the negotiated and conflicting expressions of masculinity performed within a prison visiting room

between fathers and their children. Goffman refers to the roles or expressions by the ex-offenders as front stage self (prisoner self) and backstage self (father self). Bartlett and Eriksson (2018) suggest that prison environments encourage a hyper-masculine expression by male offenders. The hyper-masculine expression is considered the front stage self because the person is acting a particular way to operate and be accepted in a specific environment (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018). When the prisoner enters the visiting room, where he is interacting with his family and friends, he expresses his backstage self, being his natural self.

The purpose of hyper-masculinity (prisoner-self) for African American males in prison and the vulnerable community in which they return is survival (Clear, 2007). The definition of a man in these two environments is a tough aggressive *guy* who personifies strength (Braman, 2004). The racial oppression of African American males for over a century is a factor that contributes to how black men define themselves (Hipp, 2007). Glynn (2013) also argued that African American males become criminalized in defiant response to a culture in which they feel powerless. Nevertheless, the backstage self emerges for ex-offenders when they are presented with intimate moments with their children. The balancing act of these two competing selves can be challenging for a person who is going through the desistance process (Shammas, 2014). There will be moments in life that are blurred, and they must decide which role to play. The decision can determine whether a person continues in the desistance process or re-offends. For example, if an ex-offender is confronted aggressively on the street does he (a) play the role of the frontstage self and react aggressively which can possibly lead to re-offending or (b) play the role of the backstage self and attempt to de-escalate the confrontation and risk being viewed weak, but that allows him to continue his desistance process. The theorizing around masculinity, carceral environments, and the desistance process, is pertinent in my view to a study of how African

American men desist from crime – and how they themselves understand it. The reasons for this relate to points identified above regarding the particular historical context of generational racism along with the various kinds of material and social oppression that these groups of marginalized men are subject to experience (Glynn, 2018).

### *The Role of Structural Impediments in Desistance*

In addition to recognizing the role masculinity has in the identity of African American ex-offenders, researchers must explore the structural realities of this population as they strive for desistance in their daily lives (Williams, 2014). Regardless of an ex-offender's desire to be successful in the desistance process, Runell (2018) identifies the challenges structural impediments impose on the individual and the limited amount of research available regarding their ability to access resources necessary to achieve success.

Current research regarding reintegration identifies that individual and environmental risk factors affect the success of an ex-offender's successful desistance (Williams, 2014). Runell conducted a study regarding the ability of 17 ex-offenders from the Boston, Massachusetts area to obtain a college degree and work in the field of social work after graduation. Although many of the participants were successful in obtaining positions in their chosen field, others faced challenges that resulted from their previous incarceration (Runnell, 2018). For example, six of the participants desired positions within the state correctional facility to work with inmates striving to obtain their GEDs (Runell, 2018). Yet, their identification as individuals either as a parolee or on probation eliminated their ability function in this capacity (Runell, 2018).

Other participant's in Runell's study found similar struggles trying to work in halfway houses, as the Massachusetts Department of Corrections prohibits ex-offenders until they have been out of prison for at least five years. Additionally, many employers conduct background

checks, which often results in the elimination of ex-offenders as potential hires (Runell, 2018). Williams (2014) asserted that when developing structures designed to help Black ex-offenders successfully reintegrate their voice and experiences must be taken into consideration. When the structures of programs designed to assist ex-offenders do not take into account their unique needs the struggle for reintegration intensifies (Williams, 2014).

#### *Wounded Healer: Higher Education and Desistance*

One pathway identified as supporting ex-offenders in their path to desistance has been involvement in *wounded healer* programs. LeBel, Richie, and Maruna (2015) conducted a study to examine whether a formal role as a wounded healer would help marginalized ex-offenders reconcile their prior criminal behavior with their current role as a productive member of society given shared experiences. The researchers hypothesized that an ex-offenders' involvement supporting previously, or currently incarcerated individuals would provide them with a method for handling the stigma's associated with criminal behavior, thus managing to achieve desistance (LeBel et al., 2015). Williams (2014) identified that ex-offenders are often willing to share their experiences and are able to maintain sympathy and understanding for the individuals going through similar events and facing societal stigmas. The results LeBel et al.'s study indicated that staff members were less likely to share that they were concerned they would face reincarceration in the next three years, which supports their attainment of identity desistance.

Providing opportunities for marginalized ex-offenders to become wounded healers can coincide with increasing higher education programs and subsequently increasing their positions in fields of social work. Participants in a study regarding collegiate programs for previously incarcerated individuals noted that it wasn't simply the classes that provided them with tools for future success, but also the experiences they had interacting with individuals on campus (Runell,



2018). It was through one of the participants on campus experiences that he decided to go into the field of social work (Runell, 2018). By choosing a career path that afforded him to become a wounded healer with a population that shared similar experiences, there was the potential for this individual to repay his debt to society, which LeBel et al. (2015) identified as a struggle for previously incarcerated individuals who were clients, rather than staff members of a wounded healer program.

The level of influence wounded healer programs can have on ex-offenders has a wide range of implications for desistance rates among formerly incarcerated African American's returning to Chicago communities because wounded healers who work in violence prevention can share similar experiences. The reflection on past choices as well as the development of a life with a plan and purpose will provide ex-offenders with the opportunity to bring positive social change to their communities (Williams, 2014). In turn, this change can reduce the stigma associated with ex-offenders and potentially change the way they are treated in society (LeBel et al., 2015). Though the wounded healer analogy is prominent in the desistance literature, I am interested to see the evolution of Shawn Ginwright's framework presented in *Hope and Healing in Urban Education* (2015), *healers who are also healing themselves*. Ginwright provides a frame beyond the negative connotation of the wounded moniker that implies something that can never be overcome. This concept takes a strength-based approach and I am very interested in exploring it more in the future after more scholarship is provided in this area of research.

### **Emerging Themes**

#### *Spiritual Conversion*

Maruna's (2001) aforementioned narrative-based model of primary desistance suggests that religious conversion could act as an important tool for many ex-offenders in the process of

reaching primary desistance. Religious conversion acts as a radical recontextualization of an ex-offender's "life script" both by allowing ex-offenders to narrativize their past misdeeds as behavior which put them on a path towards redemption and by creating a sense of accountability to an omnipresent, all powerful figure whose capacity for punishment is beyond the capabilities of a legal entity (Glynn, 2018). For example, if a person once involved in criminal activity converts to Christianity, they are made to understand that human beings are inherently sinful but can be forgiven if they behave with piety. In this example, religious conversion functions as a narrative shift; the ex-offender can identify ongoing pious behavior as a tangible, attainable goal which cannot be reached if continuing to offend.

Existing literature has suggested that religious adherence can have positive impacts on the mental well-being of prisoners. Talik and Skowronski (2008) conducted a study of 390 male prisoners, ages 19-68, in which participants took two surveys, one which gauged their perception of their quality of life and one which gauged the extent to which they utilized religiously inflected coping mechanisms. The coping methods prisoners utilized were then coded into "positive" methods -- which understood the experience of imprisonment as a God-granted opportunity for growth -- and "negative" methods -- which understood the experience of imprisonment as divine punishment. Overwhelmingly, prisoners who had a higher quality of life were also more likely to utilize positive religious coping mechanisms. Talik and Skowronski's (2008) study suggests that religious-based coping mechanisms can be utilized to improve the lives of prisoners while in jail. Prisoners who are afforded access to religious resources during their incarceration may commit more substantially to the religious principles they have espoused. Smith's (2005) study sought to identify the underlying motives for spiritual and religious change in a general population. The study's screening process stipulated that only subjects who had a

“life-changing” spiritual or religious experience were to participate (Smith, 2005); this demonstrates a tacit amenability to Glynn’s (2018) concept of personal narrative shift, in which a particular event or period of time can cause a person to create a radically new understanding of them self. While Smith (2005) did not have a subject who was coded as an ex-offender, Smith (2005) did find that periods of profound trauma, distress, and struggle were often catalysts for profound religious change. Smith’s (2005) finding that religious-based narrative shifts can happen as a result of significant personal obstacles supports the idea that religious adherence can be used to bring about primary desistance, as imprisonment is a profoundly traumatic experience.

In short, Maruna (2001), Smith (2005), and Talik and Skowronski (2008) all support the idea that spiritual conversion can act as a means of supporting narrative shift and meaningful personal change, both inside and outside of prison contexts. The impacts that spiritual practices can have on primary desistance appear to be profound renegotiations of identity and authority, yet they have not been explored in the context of African American ex-offenders in Chicago. Through this study, I sought to expand the body of knowledge regarding the impact of spiritual shifts in Chicago-based African American ex-offender’s desistance narratives.

### *Gang Affiliation or Doctrine*

Gang literature is pertinent to desistance research conducted in Chicago’s marginalized communities. All of the participants in this study, were former members or had some connection to gangs. Gang’ membership is often deeply misunderstood and demonized within the legal system; however, it is imbedded in the culture of the Chicago west side communities in this study. The intricacies of gangs are not always adequately understood within the literature, and the benefit of such social groupings may feed into desistance in some surprising ways.

Originally there were three major African American gangs in Chicago Black Gangster Disciple, Black P Stones, and the Vice Lords which over the time hundreds, if not thousands of factions, sects, and clicks. The Disciples and Stones are primarily located on the south side of Chicago and the Vice Lords originated on the west side in North Lawndale (one of the three communities that participants were selected). Thirteen of the fifteen participants were former Vice Lords. For the purpose of this study, we will be referring to the Vice Lords when discussing gang literature and culture.

The Chicago-based Vice Lords became a formidable power in the mid-20th century (Dawley, 1992). Initially, Vice Lords intended to act as a means of ensuring mutual protection and cooperation for the oppressed African-American citizens of Chicago, who developed an independent welfare system and infrastructure for protecting African-Americans from systematic racism (Dalwley, 1992). Impoverished African-American communities in Chicago had extremely limited resources and opportunities for young people to ascend in legitimate hierarchies; consequently, organized crime like the Vice Lords afforded disenfranchised youths an opportunity to receive financial support, physical protection, institutional recognition, and education (Dawley, 1992). While initially, gang violence was purely fist-fighting, greater gang-related access to firearms led to significant bouts of gun violence in Chicago; the greater lethality of gang warfare led to an increase in prison sentence time, and ultimately, an expansion of gang activity inside of prisons (Dawley, 1992). In the 1970's and 1980's, increased access to drugs, increasing hostility towards the utilization of social welfare programs, and the deindustrialization of the United States economy -- particularly under the Reagan administration -- allowed gangs to become more powerful in deindustrializing urban areas (Hagedorn, 2008).

Gang affiliation has been found to slow the desistance process (Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero, 2012). As suggested earlier when discussing intra-prison gang presence, gang organization is highly pervasive, making gangs extremely difficult to leave (Dawley, 1992). Gang membership is not an “in/out” dichotomy; just as legitimate business employees have different hierarchical positions, levels of influence, and numbers of years within the organization, gang members too have different levels of institutional investment (Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero, 2012). Gang affiliates who have higher levels of institutional investment desist more slowly than gang affiliates with lower levels of institutional investment (Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero, 2012). As with any legitimate business institution, the more an individual becomes entrenched within an organization, the greater their time investment, social network, and opportunity for advancement grows. Further, particular gang subcultures have different standards of behavior, different sets of values, and different associations with other gangs (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Gangs create profound levels of violence and disruption in the communities they inhabit; while gangs seek to give residents of marginalized areas a refuge from disempowerment and cyclical poverty, the profound instability gang violence creates in turn begets a deeply ingrained sense of nihilism in gang-controlled communities (Hagedorn, 2008). Despite this, attempts at reclaiming the community organizational infrastructures created by gangs have been made to varying degrees of success. Some Vice Lords have sought to rebrand their organization into one more consciously focused on community improvement and legitimacy; while the historical identity of the group persists in many capacities, participants in this study discussed how the reclamation of Vice Lord philosophy has worked to contribute to their desistance processes (Dawley, 1992). As Mitchell et al. (2016) assert, different gang subcultures have different sets of

cultural norms and beliefs; the participants in this study asserted that Vice Lord beliefs were recontextualized in Illinois prisons to adapt the ingrained Vice Lord philosophy into positive community action and into desistance-related practices. These accounts represented an interesting, previously unrecognized contribution to desistance-related studies.

### *Spiritual Communities*

While the impact of spiritual communities on desistance in African American communities has not been widely studied, church groups have been cited as potentially meaningful vectors for gang intervention. Hallet and McCoy (2014) discussed how, through cultivating the social bonds of church membership, ex-offenders managed to attain desistance. The 25 ex-offender subjects Hallet and McCoy (2014) studied determined that active support from their church communities helped them 1.) build a sense of individual accountability to those communities and 2.) to develop a robust sense of private spirituality, further entrenching them in their responsibilities to God. These ex-offenders' fully developed senses of responsibility to both God and their fellow churchgoers helped them avoid reoffending; in keeping with Maruna (2001), the ex-offenders felt that to re-offend after establishing themselves as members in a church community would represent a profound betrayal to their community, to God, and to their new non-offender personae. This was similarly true of the participants in this study, who often found that regular churchgoing represented a meaningful part of their desistance process.

There is a theoretical basis for this phenomenon. McMillin and Chavis (1986) describe a "sense of community" as possessing four elements: membership; influence; integration and fulfillment of needs; and shared emotional connection. "Membership" refers to a common sense of who is an insider and who is an outsider as stipulated by mutually determined semantic,

symbolic, and literal boundaries; “influence” refers to the ability of the individual and the group to equitably negotiate of group values, norms, and beliefs; “integration and fulfillment of needs” refers to the ability of the group to determine and fulfill its members individual and collective needs; and “shared emotional connection” refers to a common sense of community investment built through positive, efficacious interaction (McMillin and Chavis, 1986).

Perhaps not coincidentally, gangs and religious organizations both attempt to fit this set of criteria. A church’s congregation and a gang’s membership both have a strong sense of “insider” identity, the former determined primarily by regular church attendance and the latter formed primarily by participation in gang activity. While members of a church’s congregation and a gang’s membership can both influences, to a degree, which activities are carried out by their respective groups, they ultimately must defer to an authority figure who helps negotiate group beliefs and priorities. Collective needs are already assumed, to a degree, in both church communities and gangs -- for the former, religious salvation; for the latter, economic stability; for both, group belonging. Shared emotional connection is built in churches through religious ritual and group activity; shared emotional connection is built in gangs through trauma-bonding and common experiences of oppression. It follows that prosocial religious organizations can often serve as a meaningful substitute for antisocial gang communities.

## **Current Study**

### *Rationale for the Study*

The existing literature explores desistance through three different lenses: (a) the maturation process, (b) sociogenic factors, and (c) the identity-based model. However, the studies focus on ex-offenders who are primarily white and return to comparatively healthy communities (relative to African American communities). Little is discussed in the literature about other populations of ex-offenders. However, the literature does posit that African

American male ex-offenders returning to Chicago communities are heavily impacted by socio-economic factors (e.g., high crime rates, high unemployment, poverty, lack of resources, and saturation of ex-offenders; Miller, 2014), marginalization, and lack resources. Furthermore, communities that have a high saturation of ex-offenders, where normative behaviors are considered criminal by the larger society, and the essential elements necessary to desist related to both agency and structural factors are less apparent or less easily accessible, persist. When considering these conditions, we are left to grapple with the question, how are these individuals able to desist in a space that appears adversely from the community described in the literature? Therefore, it is extremely importance that we explore this population of ex-offenders to provide a more vivid indication of how their desistance process unfolds in less than ideal situations. In doing so, we may discover something the literature has yet to identify and make a wider contribution to the desistance scholarship.

In terms of methodology, I used qualitative methods by interviewing African American male ex-offenders from Chicago's marginalized neighborhoods to (1) uncover specific details about their desistance process in less than ideal situations, (2) allow ex-offenders to define and give a deeper meaning of their own desistance experiences, (3) allow the emergence of themes that were not considered in the literature, and (4) connect with the participants in the natural setting of the phenomenon to observe the conditions and more deeply understand the environment.

As referenced above, prior research neglects to address the experiences and processes of desistance from crime specifically pertaining to marginalized African American males who currently work in violence prevention and who reside in the inner city of Chicago. In addition, there exists ambiguity in the manner that desistance is defined by researchers. In addition, there



is a need to further examine the pains associated with desistance that includes discussion of the ‘prison to the streets continuum’. My research attempted to address these issues by examining African American male ex-offenders who have successfully abstained from committing violent and drug related crimes in Chicago. I gave the participants an opportunity to provide their own understanding of the meaning and processes of desistance and the pains associated with it.

### *Statement of Purpose*

This study utilized a qualitative interviewing approach using an interpretive constructionist paradigm with three foci. First, I identified marginalized African American male ex-offenders, who, at the time of the interview, worked in violence prevention, who lived in Austin, East Garfield Park, and/or North Lawndale communities in Chicago, and who successfully desisted from crime for over three years. After locating these individuals (see Appendix C), I conducted interviews seeking to understand the participants’ definition of ‘success’ and desistance from crime. I sought to understand their process of desistance as they describe it in their own words which is absent from the literature. This study sought to entice researchers to further explore how marginalized men who work in violence prevention return to their communities and abstain from breaking the law. Furthermore, the research found identity factors that assist in the desistance process that have yet to be considered. Lastly, the study utilized an interpretive constructionist perspective to guide the qualitative data analysis so that I could obtain an understanding of the processes, experiences, and meaning of desistance from their perspective, and understand how they define success.

### *Research Questions*

The initial and grounding question of this research was:

1). What does the desistance process look like in the first three years after leaving prison for marginalized African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention in the Austin, East Garfield, and North Lawndale communities of Chicago?

Subsidiary to this inquiry, a number of additional questions are salient, including:

2). What conceptual framework best describes the desistance process among African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention in marginalized communities on the west-side of Chicago? In other words, which elements of the sociogenic, maturation, and identity-based models best explain the desistance process of this specific demographic, what is the dynamic between them, and in what ways might they be inadequate or only partial?

3) What role does institutional or interpersonal racism play in the desistance process for this demographic?

### **3. Research Methods and Design**

This study sought to explore the research question: How do marginalized African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention and who reside in the city of Chicago understand their desistance from crime? The limited current body of literature exploring desistance among marginalized African American ex-offenders working in violence prevention convinced me that it would be most appropriate to employ qualitative interviewing using an interpretive constructionist perspective. The conceptual framework collectively with the research design created an opportunity to permit the voices of marginalized African ex-offenders who work in violence prevention in urban settings to be heard.

Qualitative interviewing was necessary to understand what the desistance process looked like for African American male ex-offenders in marginalized communities on Chicago's west side, and to discover how they defined successful desistance. Qualitative interviewing using an interpretive constructionist perspective allowed me to understand and describe the processes, conditions, challenges, culture, and the participants' definition of 'successfully' abstaining from breaking the law. While qualitative methods seek to capture the rich complexities of social worlds and individual lived experiences, it is also grounded in human behavior and seeks to understand why people act in a particular manner (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Creswell (2007, p. 5) provides a useful definition of qualitative research as:

An inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports details of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.

The interviews sought to discover how marginalized ex-offender males who currently work in violence prevention and who reside in the city of Chicago experience the desistance process in their communities despite the lack of limited resources, and the internal battle to

overcome learned maladaptive behaviors. The qualitative interviews allowed marginalized African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention from the west side of Chicago communities the opportunity to give definitions, terms, and meaning to their social process of desistance (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995).

### *Participant Selection*

I used a purposeful selection strategy to begin the data collection process by contacting 10 violence prevention agencies (see Appendix C) located in the following west Chicago communities: Austin, North Lawndale, and East Garfield – West Humboldt Park. The three communities where the research occurred contain numerous non-profit social service agencies that hire ex-offenders. Additionally, the three communities selected are close in proximity and a part of the seven communities in which over 90 % of all ex-offenders from the Illinois Department of Corrections return (Jackson-Green, 2015). Furthermore, I had (and continue to have) relationships with these organizations due to my extensive work experience of almost a decade in human services. These organizations were essential to the recruiting process of participants as they provide services for ex-offenders and serve predominately African Americans. To determine which agencies to contact I developed an alphabetical list of the agencies for each community and contacted agencies according to their alphabetical placement. The initial contact included one agency, beginning with the first from the alphabetical list, from each community with a goal of obtaining five participants from each community. When I was unable to obtain 5 participants from one agency, I contacted another agency within the community.

Once I obtained permission from the agencies, I requested approval from the Executive Director to attend a staff meeting. During the staff meeting I described the study, assured

potential participants of the voluntary nature of the study, and guaranteed their confidentiality. Afterwards, I answered all questions and left contact information for the staff. Additionally, I asked the Executive Director for permission to post a flyer within the agency containing my contact information. This recruitment process, as well as the informed consent process described below, were all approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois at Chicago under protocol # 2019-1379.

When contacted by phone or in person from interested participants I explained the inclusion criteria, which included,

- 1) Have been home from prison for at least three years,
- 2) Were convicted of a serious felony (drug related crime, violence, weapons charge, etc.),
- 3) Served at least one year in jail or prison,
- 4) Reside in one of the three communities (Austin, East Garfield, and North Lawndale) for at least a year,
- 5) Not involved in criminal activity for at least three years.
- 6) Are at least 25 years old
- 7) Identify as a black male
- 8) Do not have any open cases or present charges
- 9) Are not on parole, probation, supervised release, or court supervision (county, state, and federal)

Additionally, I excluded any participant from the study who was involved in an isolated incident that resulted in a felony conviction. In this research, I wanted to examine the desistance journey of individuals immersed in criminal lifestyles because it would allow a richer understanding of the process. It was my goal to obtain five participants from each community and took the first five individuals who meet the inclusion criteria. In the event that I was unable to recruit 15 participants, I planned on using snowball sampling to recruit potential participants and would have asked those who have agreed to participate to reach out to individuals to reach the desired participant total. The use of snowball sampling suggests people associate with others who have similar experiences, backgrounds, cultures, etc. (Creswell, 2007). People who have

been to prison and desisted crime know others who have shared a similar journey; this is particularly common in the human service workplace where group (circle practice) and one on one discussions and mentoring are common to prevent relapse. I continued the recruitment process until I had obtained 15 participants and reached data saturation. These strategies ensured that the study selected participants who have experienced successful desistance from crime in marginalized communities.

The criteria for inclusion in the study were developed from the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council website, which states “In Illinois, [over 45 percent](#) of offenders released from prison each year will have returned three years later” (Jackson-Green, 2015). Second, a serious felony conviction with at least one year of time served in prison was utilized as a way of identifying individuals who lived criminal lifestyles as opposed to individuals whose crime was an isolated event in their life. Last, the reentry literature suggested that employment is a critical component of successful reentry and desistance; individuals employed are three times less likely to reoffend (Chamberlain & Wallace, 2015). Potential participants in the research were asked to verify if these criterial were true, as opposed to this researcher documenting or validating their veracity through other means. This decision was made in order to avoid collecting additional sensitive information from the subjects, which could create discomfort or create additional intrusions on their privacy.

Once I obtained the desired number of participants, I provided each of the potential participants in the study with a document (see Appendix B) that outlined the purpose of the interview, explained that the interview is completely voluntary, and ensured the protection of the identity of the participants. If the potential participants said they met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. I set a convenient time and place for the interviews. At the time of the

meeting I reviewed with the participant the participant consent form (Appendix B) and sought permission to record the interview. All the participants allowed recording of the interview, in addition I took important notes during the interview and typed them up immediately following the interview's conclusion.

### *Consent and Confidentiality*

At the beginning of the scheduled interview, an informed consent form (see Appendix B) was presented and read aloud to each participant, as well as a hardcopy provided, allowing for any variations in literacy. I asked each participant if he understood everything that was read and whether he had any questions. Afterward, I reminded him that the interview was voluntary, he was free to interrupt and ask questions at any time during the interview, and he could terminate the interview at any time

I used pseudonyms and code words to protect each participants' identity as recommended by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). Due to the potential re-traumatization when discussing difficult experiences, I informed participants that they could discontinue the interview at any time. Contact information was collected for the purpose of contacting participants before, during, or after the study. This was followed by the semi-structured questions (Appendix A).

### *Setting*

The interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient for the participants. Some of the interviews were at the homes of participants. I expressed to the participants that I was willing to travel to their home and that I had access to several offices in the community. In particular, I arranged to utilize a private, quiet office space in the Printer's Row area of the Loop located at 801 S. Financial. The location was in an area accessible by public transportation. Furthermore, there was a parking lot for individuals who preferred driving to the location.

## *Interviews*

I interviewed 15 marginalized ex-offenders, five from each of the three communities, who worked in the Chicago violence prevention space. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) proposed that data saturation occurs within the first twelve interviews and the likelihood of further emerging themes are minute. Creswell (2007) suggest interviewing a small group between 5 and 25 participants to focus on the experiences and perspectives. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative methods do not seek to generalize, instead to capture and understand a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In interviewing 15 participants, I was able to both reach data saturation and meet the standard posited by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006).

The interviews conducted were 60 – 90 minutes long in an attempt to gather a comprehensive understanding of the participants' desistance from crime experience. I realized follow-up interviews may have been necessary to explore an emerging theme in more detail or clarify points raised. I was the sole interviewer of all the participants. The semi-structured nature of the interview consisted of open-ended questions that allowed the participants to deeply describe their experiences in their own words and probe particular themes that are pertinent in the literature with the use of an interview protocol (see Appendix F). The probes were used to elicit specific information, such as, "who or what supports helped you abstain from committing crime after your prison release." I took this approach to capture the desistance process in the narrative voice of the African American male ex-offenders living in Chicago marginalized communities.

I interviewed the participants face to face to watch their body language, see their facial expressions, and for the personal connection. I remained open during the interviews to emerging themes or ideas that may have guided the research in a different direction. The primary means of



documenting the interview in real time was an audio recording device – this was, of course, subject to the requisite participant consent. In addition, I occasionally jotted down important notes so that I remembered to follow up on particular questions. The advantage of audio recording versus note taking is accuracy, it allowed me to be attentive and present during the interview, and it was easier to manage the data afterward.

### *Transcription and Coding*

I utilized the software Express Scribe Transcription to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews. I planned to analyze the data taking an inductive approach and identify themes throughout the interviews. Interpretive constructionist guided the qualitative data analysis so that I could identify processes and practices relevant to the desistance theory or potentially inform new pertinent concepts that have yet to be explored in literature (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 190).

The following are the eight steps I took in data analysis and interpretation:

1. Organize the data from the auto recording.
2. Read through all of the data to get a general idea of the direction of the information.
3. Describe personal experiences with the phenomenon (i.e., criminal desistance). This is the effort by the researcher to set aside personal experiences, acknowledging it can't be done in entirety, but for the purpose of keeping the focus directed on and to the participants of this study.
4. Open coding line by line followed by focused coding. (Write down statements, quotes, and sentences that describe an understanding of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon).
5. Write memos.
6. Identify themes throughout the data.
7. Decide how the themes will be represented in the narrative.
8. Interpret the meaning of the data.

As elaborated in Rubin and Rubin (2012, p. 190), upon completion of the interviews and transcription, Atlas T.I. qualitative software was employed to help manage, code, and analyze the data (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). Afterwards, I used open coding to generate codes in the data. “Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks before bringing meaning to those

chunks” (Rossman & Rollins, 1998, p. 171). The use of open coding was applied to each sentence in the data using active verbs. Open coding does not consider the connectedness of the concepts in a discipline or the theoretical focus for analysis or organization (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). Open codes were written in the margins to help clarify the meaning of the data. Next, focus coding took place; then I wrote code memos to develop, preserve, and elaborate on ideas. The codes and memos were then categorized into themes to help organize the data. Once the themes were established, I began a line by line analysis of the selected data which is called focused coding. Focused coding allowed me to recognize patterns and to establish a direction of the story about the participants’ processes and experiences. The utilization of focused coding provided an opportunity for re-coding the transcripts that were guided by the themes identified in the open-coding memos. Once focused coding was finished, the construction of integrative memos took place to elaborate on themes identified in the data and link them together.

### *Reflexivity*

There are myriad of nuances to reflexivity in research, particularly when one assumes an insider status, which brings with it additional and unique elements. This subsection is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of these nuances; rather, I will offer a general overview of some of the more salient points, along with referencing some of the key insights from the literature. As a researcher, there were certain elements that I consider when I enter a space to learn and understand a particular phenomenon or to answer a specific question. Being the primary tool of data collection and analysis, reflexivity allows me to identify my positionality, biases, and connectedness with the research project. Liebling’s (2014) insights about bringing one’s emotions into the research encounter, though not without question. According to Barry, Britten, Barber, Bradley, and Stevenson (1999), “Reflexivity emphasizes an awareness of the researcher’s own presence in the research process” (p. 30).

In this study, I considered several important factors as I attempted to conduct this research project. I was here an insider on the outsider – insider continuum. I fit the criteria for a participant and share similar experiences with the ex-offenders I interviewed in the study. I am an African American male who was convicted of a felony and served over a decade in prison. Furthermore, I am a native of the Austin area (one of the communities that I was gathering participants for the research). I understand and understood that my familiarity with the population and the community along with my own personal experiences created certain biases as I entered the space. Therefore, to avoid the pitfalls of assuming answers or leading participants, I put structures, such as a journal, in place to guide me and to prevent skewing the data.

The benefits of this qualitative research far outweighed the challenges of me being so close to the phenomena I researched. My insider positionality allowed me to understand the culture, language, social norms, and the challenges the participants face when returning to these communities. In addition, I can identify with the emotional pain of experiencing racism and incarceration, as well as the struggle of trying to be a man as defined by an Anglo-Saxon, patriarchal, capitalistic society. My strong insider connection was beneficial in formulating the questions in a relatable manner, understanding the lexicon (urban cultural language), probing, and analyzing the data. As well as being important in the data collection stage, reflexivity is also necessary during the analysis stage. This means, “examining the ontological and epistemological assumptions built into particular methods of data analysis by those who both develop and use them” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 422). My ontological assumptions in this study were the existence of criminalization of African Americans in these marginalized communities, the high level of surveillance, the important role socio-economic factors play along with high unemployment rates; and, my epistemological assumption originated from my lived experience

as an ex-offender returning to the Austin community. Additionally, my relationships in the communities and understanding of the culture allowed me access to potential participants.

Some of the challenges I faced in the study included my insider positionality impacting me emotionally. Many times, I found myself crying as I analyzed the data. The depth of the conversations and level of transparency of the participants validated the importance of this study. Hearing the voices of these men humbled me and I felt so grateful that they found me worthy and trusted me enough to be transparent and vulnerable with their feelings, challenges, and insecurities. As an insider, I understand this is uncommon for African American men, in particular those who were once a part of gangs and have found a place in violence prevention. In addition, at times I felt triggered and somewhat traumatized during the interviewing process when the participants talked about the impact their incarceration had on their children and past negative experiences with law enforcement.

My connectedness to the community and the phenomena was undeniable and gave me urges to anticipate answers to questions instead of allowing the themes to emerge. However, I was able to offset these challenges by following Watt's (2007) suggestion, "An introspective record of a researcher's work potentially helps them to take stock of biases, feelings, and thoughts, so they can understand how these may be influencing the research" (p 84). By having similar lived experiences as the participants, I realized these urges was normal and could be used as an asset in understanding the depth of data.

The utilization of reflexivity in the study ultimately served to keep me conscious of my predispositions and safeguarded the fidelity of the project. As noted by Barry et al. (1999), "The end point of reflexivity is to improve the quality of the research" (p. 30). By inserting myself into the data, I was reminded of certain biases when I was coding and writing the results. Lastly,

reflexivity served as an acknowledgement of my human frailties and inability to omit my preexisting thoughts of my own desistance process. Instead, I embraced my positionality on the outsider – insider continuum, while allowing myself to establish processes or steps to ensure good research practices. In order to ensure validity, I utilized member checking and peer review.

### *Verification*

I employed member checking, peer review, and thick description in striving for trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The utilization of member checking ensured that my data is credible. I facilitated this process by discussing emerging data analysis with the participants during the course of the study. The purpose of member checking was to ensure the analysis was consistent with participants' understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Undergoing this process of member checking with the participants validated that my understanding of their desistance process was in fact, as they had intended to tell their stories. In addition, I periodically met with members of my committee and colleagues to elicit feedback regarding patterns I found during my process of coding and analyzing the data. This strategy helped me determine whether my coding and analysis was constructed logically. The peer reviewers consisted of two committee members and two classmates who recently completed the PhD. program and successfully completed their dissertations. The committee chair provided oversight and ongoing monitoring.

### *Time*

The interviews lasted for approximately two to three months (at least three days a week) or until data saturation occurred, wherein no new information emerges, and coding was no longer necessary (Guest et al., 2006). Qualitative methods were not chronological, but rather involved multiple processes occurring simultaneously (Maxwell, 2005). Afterwards, I conducted

an analysis of the data, coding, and creation of the themes to prepare for the narrative, which took several months. Finally, it took several months to write-up the qualitative narrative.

In total, this entire research project took about a year to complete. COVID-19 played a critical role in my study being finished in a timelier fashion. The enactment of sheltering in place, social distancing, and working remotely allowed me to dedicate hundreds of hours to my research that I otherwise would have spent doing other things. Lastly, my experience as a practitioner in the violence prevention community for the past ten years gave me credibility and the ability to promptly access participants.

The qualitative dissertation study sought to understand (1) how the desistance process looks in the first three years after leaving prison; (2) the framework that best describes the desistance process (i.e. sociogenic, maturation, and/or identity-based), and 3) the role institutional or interpersonal racism plays in the desistance process, specifically for African American male ex-offenders in the Austin, East Garfield, and North Lawndale communities of Chicago. In terms of contributions, this study expanded desistance scholarship through the exploration of experiences of a population that represents the majority of incarcerated individuals in Chicago and yet is not present in the literature. Additionally, the study was unique in that it explored the marginalized communities and the role they play in desistance both positively and negatively. Furthermore, I used the research to examine the pains associated with desistance that while discussed in the literature could be developed in relation to the specific demographic my study engages with. Results from the dissertation research revealed the process of desistance for marginalized African American males who work in violence prevention in Chicago and their perception of successful desistance in their own words. The qualitative methodology provided rich and nuanced detail about the desistance process in less than ideal

situations and serves as a way to discover important aspects of the agency-structure dynamic that are not fully explored in the existing literature.

#### **4. Findings**

A total of fifteen men were interviewed for this study. Included below are brief overviews of the participants' lives, beginnings in crime, prison histories, educational histories, work histories, and motivations for continued desistance. To ensure the protection of the subjects' identities, all participants were given pseudonyms. During the interviews, no subjects appeared to be distressed. Some, to the contrary, understood their participation in this study as a means of helping themselves heal and as a restorative service to community members. By spending the time to consider the challenges they have faced, the mistakes they have made, and their paths to redemption, these participants contributed to a meaningful discussion about how to adequately support ex-offenders through the desistance process. As an insider, I found myself grappling with my emotions as I heard the stories of these men. Hearing the voices of these men humbled me and I felt so grateful that they found me worthy and trusted me enough to be vulnerable by sharing their stories. Throughout the interviews, the participants shared their, feelings, fears, insecurities, challenges, and triumphs.

Structurally, this chapter is as follows: 1) Exploring Research Questions, 2) Participant Biographies, and 3) Desistance Process Findings. Included in this chapter will be the insertion of the voice of the participants using their own words. The value of interspersing these personal accounts with academic analyses is to represent their own voices on their own terms.

##### *Exploring Research Questions*

The initial and grounding questions of this research were:



- 1). What does the desistance process look like in the first three years after leaving prison for marginalized African American male ex-offenders who currently work in violence prevention in the Austin, East Garfield, and North Lawndale communities of Chicago?
- 2). What conceptual framework best describes the desistance process among this specific demographic, which elements of the sociogenic, maturation, and identity-based models best explain the desistance process, what is the dynamic between them, and in what ways might they be inadequate or only partial?
- 3) What role does institutional or interpersonal racism play in the desistance process?

To address these research questions, a qualitative research methodology was used, which better allowed participants' personal accounts of desistance experiences to be holistically evaluated. Data from fifteen participants was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interview design allowed the participants to better explain and detail different elements of their personal accounts of desistance. The first phase of the analysis included gathering interview data based on the research questions. The use of ATLAS.ti allowed hundreds of pages of data, memos, and notes to be easily stored and organized.

The following chapter presents a detailed set of findings via group composite textual descriptions of Chicago-based African American ex-offenders presently in the process of desistance. The group composite design allowed experiences common to multiple participants' experiences to be explored in-depth from multiple points of view. To preserve the integrity of these individual points of view, I have included verbatim excerpts from interviews with participants. Through this method of presentation, I hope to show as complete and nuanced an image of the desistance process as possible.

A total of fifteen men were interviewed for this study. During the interviews, no subjects appeared to be distressed. Some, on the contrary, understood their participation in this study as a means of helping themselves heal and as a restorative service to community members.

### *Participant Biographies*

#### Participant 1: Lamon

Lamon is a 54-year-old returning citizen who has been in jail twice for a total of 24 years. He grew up on the West Side of Chicago in the Henry Horner Projects. He never knew his mom and lived with his father whose attitude drew Lamon into the streets at the age of 12. The first time he was arrested he was sentenced to prison for six years for selling drugs. The second time he was incarcerated for 18 years, he made the commitment to educate himself and never go back to prison. While in prison, Lamon received a business management degree, a drug counselor certification, and taught other inmates how to cut hair. He continues to work as a barber now that he is out of jail, in addition to his work as an outreach worker at a violence prevention program on the West Side of Chicago. He is committed to cutting off anything that is toxic or jeopardizes his freedom (e.g., gang-affiliated people, former hangouts, legally dubious jobs, etc.) because he believes the key to successfully staying crime free is a changed mindset.

#### Participant 2: Lavergne

Lavergne grew up on the West Side of Chicago in the West Garfield Park Community. He grew up in a family of four with a single mom and contends that he became involved in the street life because of the influence of his peers. According to Lavergne, the first time he was arrested he received 30 years for a contract murder that he did not commit. He spent years in jail educating himself on law and fighting his case until he was released with the help of a skilled

lawyer. However, his mindset had not changed and after 7 months he was back in jail. For 2 years he spent every morning going to the law library to study as a way to help him mentally while in prison. Once released, this time he made up his mind to change his vision and his goals. He attributes his success for staying out of prison to the fact that he had kids that depended on him. He works at a violence prevention organization on the West Side of Chicago as outreach supervisor.

#### Participant 3 : LeClaire

LeClaire is a 50-year-old who grew up in Bellwood, Illinois and attended both Triton College and Texas Southern University. However, he spent most of his time on the West Side of Chicago. Despite his education, he came from a family with three generations of drug dealers and became heavily involved in selling drugs. His drug sales led to his arrest and being sentenced to 12 years in prison. During his time in prison, at first, he did not want to work or study and found it hard to adjust to the rules and structure of the prison. However, over time, he realized that he wanted to make a change in his life to be ready to rejoin society once he was free. His studies and the loss of many of his family members during his time in prison influenced his mental shift. Today he finds encouragement to stay on the right path from the youth he mentors at violence prevention organization on the West Side of Chicago. He motivates himself by setting an example of how change can affect the individual, his family, and the community around him.

#### Participant 4: Leamington

Leamington grew up on the West Side of Chicago in the Austin area. His family struggled financially, so he turned to selling drugs and the gang in the neighborhood to help ease

the burden on his mother. At the age of 17, he was in an altercation with someone who owed him money and shot the man in the leg. The man later died from the shooting and Leamington was charged with murder and sentenced to prison for 18 years. In prison, being so young, he found it difficult to be away from home and to be so helpless. He found solace in having certain friends there that he knew from Chicago. He transformed his life in prison by doing research on different religions, which eventually led to his conversion to Islam during the last two years of his sentence. He contends that his role as a life coach at a violence prevention organization, his faith, and his family help him stay out of prison.

#### Participant 5: LaPorte

LaPorte grew up on the West Side of Chicago and was active in the local church at a very young age. He later turned to a gang and became a member so that others would stop bullying him and rose in the ranks to become a leader. He found a sense of camaraderie within the gang, but it quickly turned to violence and death. Eventually he was arrested for selling drugs and was sent to prison. He did not want to get trapped in the prison industrial complex system and saw the need to return to mainstream society. He used his faith in Christianity to learn trust, patience, and perseverance. He stayed focused by attending school to obtain his GED, reading a lot, and working on changing the flaws in his character. His motivation to stay out of prison comes from remembering his past, staying positive, his work in violence prevention as an outreach worker, and his friends and family.

#### Participant 6: Laramie

Laramie grew up in the projects on the West Side of Chicago. He experienced first-hand the pain associated with the drug epidemic and had several challenges in his home life.

Eventually, he became part of a gang, or “brotherhood” as he refers to it, which gave him a sense of belonging and he became involved with drugs. From the ages of 12 to 21 he was in and out of prison. Then around age 21 or 22, he was locked up again for 7 full years. At first, he spent his time in prison angry at anyone that challenged him. Eventually he went back to reflect on that anger and chose to focus on improving himself. He separated himself from his organization and kept himself busy. After studying several spiritual paths, he chose Christianity to help him cope with the mental stresses and trauma that comes from incarceration. Also, he spent a lot of time studying subjects such as sociology, psychology, and resume building in preparation for his release from prison. He attributes his success and motivation to staying out of prison to having a good support system, mentors, and staying away from scenarios that could lead to criminal behavior. Presently, he works as a program manager at a violence prevention organization on the West Side of Chicago.

#### Participant 7: Latrobe

Latrobe grew up on the West Side of Chicago and was around drug sales, gangs, and violence in his community at an early age. He started participating in gang activity and became a known gang member on the streets at the age of 18. He was arrested for gun possession and selling drugs at 18, and then was sentenced to 81 months for a drug offense again at the age of 23. In prison, he continued hustling to survive, and kept his sanity by talking for 10 minutes every day with a loved one on the phone. After prison, he obtained a job working with the community that helped him adjust back to mainstream life. He finds motivation to stay out of prison by the need to be a role model for his family and children, his faith, and his job as an outreach worker at violence prevention program in his community.

#### Participant 8: Lockwood

Lockwood grew up near Pulaski and Wilcox on the West Side of Chicago. His brother was a leader of a gang and Lockwood naturally ended up in the same gang as well. He found love and acceptance there at an early age. He started stealing at a young age and as he grew older his criminal behavior evolved into robbing until his late 30s. He ended up going to prison for a high-profile drug conspiracy and was locked up at the age of 46 or 47. In prison he committed to being positive, going to church, and turning his life around. Once he was released, he was determined not to return and avoided situations that might lead him back there. His wife and children, as well as his work in violence prevention as an outreach worker, helped him stay committed.

#### Participant 9: Lorel

Lorel grew up on the West Side of Chicago in the Austin Community. He came from a good family, but slowly became increasingly involved with a gang, dealing drugs, and hustling on the streets. He went to prison for selling drugs and spent his time expressing himself through music. His music helped him make friends and connect with other inmates. He did not prepare much for his release from prison, but just felt overjoyed to be free. He stays out of prison by remembering all the time he lost, particularly with his 2-year-old daughter that did not even recognize him when he returned. He goes to church and works as an outreach worker at a violence prevention program on the West Side of Chicago. His wife, kids, grandkids, and pets are all a huge part of his motivation to stay out of crime. His community helps him as well by staying positive and not doubting him.

#### Participant 10: Long

Long grew up in the “Holy City” (North Lawndale) on the West Side where he was exposed to gang activity daily. As a teenager he became involved in a gang to gain respect, power, and acceptance. He began selling drugs while in high school to earn money, which led to him being arrested and sentenced to probation. While on probation, he was shot several times and paralyzed for over a year. However, Long continued selling drugs because the incident did not change his mentality. Eventually he went to prison for fraud, a white-collar crime, and received his wake-up call. He had challenges dealing with prison mentally and tried to stay focused on the fact that unlike some, he had a release date. After his release, he became involved with church service through his mom, but over time he lost his wife, his relationship with his kids and even his home. During this time, he moved into a shelter and committed to change his way of thinking. He stays out of prison now by not hanging out with people that do not have anything to lose and staying away from his old connections and places. He gets motivation by looking up to the people around him, having goals, and not taking shortcuts. He works as a supervisor at an outreach program on the West Side of Chicago.

#### Participant 11: Lotus

Lotus grew up in different areas of the West Side of Chicago and was exposed to drugs, gangs, violence, and all the other social woes associated with impoverished communities in urban cities. He joined a gang to have confidence and to avoid being victimized in his neighborhood. Due to peer pressure, being a gang member, and selling drugs; he was incarcerated at a young age. In prison, he tried to stay busy with reading books, participating in Bible study, and connecting with his family through writing, phone calls, and visits. He was determined to change his behavior and not do the things that led to his incarceration. His only

support system after leaving prison was his family and friends that shared similar experiences as him. His motivation to stay out of prison comes from changing his mindset, staying positive, and his work with violence prevention program as an outreach worker.

#### Participant 12: Lawler

Lawler grew up in the North Lawndale community on the West Side of Chicago. His mother was a prominent hustler and taught him everything about the streets. He learned quickly and became enamored with how much money could make selling drugs. He soon joined a gang with the people in his community. He was arrested several times for selling drugs until he received a federal indictment and was sentenced to over a decade in prison. While in prison, he was able to educate himself and change the way he thought about crime. He went to the library daily and communicated with positive people to develop positive coping mechanisms. After, he was released, he attended school at Dawson Tech and procured a certification in construction. His motivation to stay out of prison is his wife, children, and his job in violence prevention as an outreach worker.

#### Participant 13: Linder

Linder grew up in the Alden Courts Projects on the West Side of Chicago, an area that was impoverished, violent, and known for gang activity. He began selling drugs at the age of 11 and joined a gang that his friends and family were a part of at the age of 13. Selling drugs was necessary to survive financially because his parents suffered from the disease of drug addiction. At the age of 17, Linder was convicted of a homicide and sentence to over two decades in prison. During his time in prison, he was committed to becoming a changed man who was free of a criminal mindset. He stayed occupied with education and used the gang literature as a moral



compass to redirect his thoughts. After his released from prison, he set goals to stay focused, obtained a job, and changed the people, places, and things that were part of his old life. He now works as a life coach at a violence prevention organization on the West Side of Chicago, a fitness trainer, and a motivational speaker to rebuild young men that have gotten into a life of crime.

#### Participant 14: Lexington

Lexington grew up in the Austin area of the West Side of Chicago in a dysfunctional household. There was a lot of peer pressure from his friends in the neighborhood to join their gang. His involvement in the gang led to him selling and using drugs and involvement in other criminal activities. He went to prison several times for doing crimes to support his drug addiction. During his last stint in prison, he was filled with contrition and begin to focus on rebuilding his character, reading, and preparing to stay clean from drugs. Also, he found a pathway to a new life through the gang literature that he studied in prison and had been familiar with his entire life.

“The gang I belonged to, or the street organization, they’re saying love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice, and that that was the essence of men. If you’re not in pursuit of that, you would conflict yourself. Right? But those principles can’t be argued with. Love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice. Listen, I was a terrible Vice Lord back then because they didn’t tell me to sell drugs.”

After his release, he found men support groups to help him see that others had gotten through similar struggles and he could too. He finds his success in staying out of prison came from being connected to people that believed in him and staying away from drugs. He now works as a certified drug recovery specialist and re-entry coach at a violence prevention organization on the West Side of Chicago. His job reminds him daily of the struggle that he overcame and how important it is to stay on track.

## Participant 15: LeMoyne

LeMoyne grew up on the West Side of Chicago moving to the K-Town area at the age of nine. He became involved with a gang early in his childhood and was instrumental in starting a faction of Vice Lords in a juvenile detention center. He was arrested several times and spent many years in and out of prison due to his addiction to heroin. His longest stay in prison, from 19 to 27, resulted from a home invasion and an armed robbery all caused by his addiction. In prison, he was forced to rely upon the teachings and principles of Vice Lord Literature to educate the younger brothers coming into the prison. In the process of teaching others the literature, LeMoyne discovered a pathway to a crime free life.

“The Vice Lord literature really gave me a frame of reference about us being Vice Lords. I would use that to get the little guys to see themselves different. The Vice Lords believe in the five-point star, and so I was just talking to them little brothers that the five-point star represents the true essence of man because every man is seeking for love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice in his life.”

Also, he read a plethora of books, worked on getting his head straight, and started treatment for his addiction. After prison he continued to go to support groups and meetings for addiction where he learned about peer-support and self-help. His work as a violence prevention trainer, drug counselor, mentor, and drug sponsor keep him motivated to stay on track.

### *Desistance Process Findings*

The process of desistance is highly idiosyncratic and personal; it marks the beginning of a complicated change in an ex-offender's life, requiring a challenging, multi-step approach. While the particulars of the 15 participants' individual experiences were varied, four salient themes built the group composite textual description: (1) primary desistance – narrative shift; (2) secondary – sociogenic desistance; (3) pains of desistance; and (4) participants' view of successful desistance. I have outlined how these elements of desistance are defined and what

behaviors and milestones they may include. This discussion is followed by a more detailed analyses of participants' experiences with the desistance process, and identifications of themes common across desistance processes.

### *1. Primary Desistance – Narrative Shift*

Primary desistance refers to the initial act of desisting by an offender (Maruna, 2001). As Maruna (2001) and Glynn (2018) discussed, primary desistance often occurs in tandem with a shift in the ex-offender's conception of their self-narrative. Rather than narrativizing his life as that of a criminal, the ex-offender begins narrativizing his life as that of a person in the process of redemption (Glynn, 2018). When recounting their experiences during the period of primary desistance, participants described various changes in their self-perceptions, their personal narratives, and their identities.

### *2. Secondary Desistance - Sociogenic*

Secondary desistance refers to the point in time when an individual no longer understands himself as an offender, allowing him to maintain a pro-social life for a given period (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; King, 2013). This pro-social period is generally intended to last for the duration of a person's life, though relapse into criminal offense is always possible (McNeil & Maruna, 2007; Sampson & Laub, 2007). When discussing their motivations for enduring desistance, participants described several ongoing support systems upon which they relied to stay away from criminal behaviors and temptations.

### *3. Pains of Desistance*

During the desistance process, ex-offenders face various setbacks and challenges. Nugent and Schinkel (2016) identified three different types of socio-emotional setback common to ex-offenders in the process of desistance, termed "pains of desistance." These "pains" have been

identified as 1) pain of isolation, 2) pain of goal failure, and 3) pain of hopelessness (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). When discussing the challenges they faced during the desistance process, participants identified different psychological and material obstacles to successful desistance.

#### *4. Participants' View of Successful Desistance*

Successful desistance is a complicated term to define, in part because scholars have not conclusively determined what constitutes “desistance.” While some scholars understand desistance as a gradual process of decreasing involvement in crime, others understand desistance as an immediate withdrawal from criminal activity, and still others view desistance as the cessation of criminal behavior within a particular age range (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Barnett, Blumstein, and Farrington, 1987; Farrington and Hawkins, 1991). Through these interviews, participants identified different behaviors which they understood as significant elements of a successful desistance.

### **Themes**

#### *1. Primary Desistance – Narrative Shift*

In my literature review, I discuss Maruna’s (2001) narrative-based approach to the identity-driven desistance model. In Maruna’s (2001) view, an ex-offender desists by reframing the story they choose to tell about themselves, and then living in a manner consistent with that reframing; this allows ex-offenders to build a new identity based around this narrative shift. Glynn’s (2018) critical race theory-based study of once-incarcerated African American males corroborates Maruna’s (2001) work, suggesting that there is a precedent for narrative shifts of this nature to positively impact desistance in the community this study sought to better understand.

Findings in this study support Maruna's (2001) and Glynn's (2018) assertions that narrative-based reconfigurations of African American ex-offenders' identities are an important asset in the desistance process. Many participants attested to instances in time and shifts in perspective which functioned as meaningful turning points in their self-narrative, and ultimately helped them begin the desistance process. When the theme of narrative shifts was discussed, participants repeatedly invoked four subthemes: cognitive shifts, spiritual shifts, re-appropriation of gang ideology, spiritual communities, and emotional/psychological fatigue.

### *1. Cognitive*

Participants indicated that primary desistance often occurred in tandem with a profound shift in "thinking." While changes in thought processes are often invoked as the catalyst for changes in behavior, the way individual thinking is shifted varies. In some cases (Lemoyne #15), the shift in thinking is avoidant in nature. In these cases, the ex-offender recognizes that the thought patterns they have internalized will ultimately cause them to return to prison; uninterested in repeating this cycle, the ex-offender tries to modify their thought processes. As Lemoyne said, "I got socialized into a criminal lifestyle, so I had to learn socialize into this life as a citizen."

In other cases (Lavergne #2 and Lorel #9), the shift in thinking comes from a renewed sense of motivation. In the case of Lavergne (#2), the participant promised his son that the family would no longer be sleeping in homeless shelters; Lavergne's commitment to his family's livelihood provided him with an enduring source of motivation.

I think I had a made-up mind and my vision, and my goals had changed. I understand that I was a father, that I had kids, that they were depending on me. My son asked me, Daddy, do we have to go back to a shelter? And I told him, as long as I got breath in my body, you'll never have to go back to a shelter. And I took off from there. (Lavergne #2)

In the case of Lorel (#9), the participant came to understand that his tenacity (“my never-give-up spirit”) allowed him to survive homelessness, a gunshot wound, imprisonment, and paralysis; he realized that by refocusing this quality into something positive, he would be impossible to “stop.” These participants’ asset-based re-conceptions of challenging situations provided them with the motivation to ultimately begin primary desistance.

In some cases, participants’ cognitive shifts involved a more holistic change in mindset. Lamon (#1) and Lotus (#11) both discussed how they individually reworked their thought processes to reflect more generative goals which did not coincide with criminal behaviors. In cases like Lamon and Lotus, they were unable to fully articulate the severity of the pain, scars and trauma from their lived experiences that ushered them on a path to desistance. They found it difficult to give material examples of how their changed thought processes altered their respective behaviors; both spoke about how markedly different their mindsets were before desistance. In short, differences in understanding, focus, and mindset were mentioned in many accounts of primary desistance. Lamon stated the following,

So I've got a strong mindset, and that, right there, mentally, I just feel like you got to deal with stuff face-on. What it is, and deal with it, and then, now, you ain't-- I'm trying to find the right words to use, Chico, so you could really get what I'm saying. Like, a lot of people be patty-caking their feelings, or their thoughts, or they'll say what they think you want to hear, but they really ain't deliver from nothing, bro. Because they mindset have not changed because they didn't deal with what was going on.

## *2. Spirituality*

Some participants indicated that primary desistance occurred in tandem with a newfound interest in spirituality. Several participants indicated that belief in a higher power allowed them to feel a meaningful connection with God, which helped them change their behavior.

Leamington (#4) discussed “getting right with God” as the main practice involved in his

narrative shift. In the case of Linder (#13), the participant described his relationship with God as one in which he feels completely understood by a father figure whose authority he understands as legitimate. It is this authority that Linder indicated he trusts and where he finds strength during difficult situations, no longer needing to rely wholly on himself. This ties into concepts of performed masculinity in prison. As Shammass (2014) argued, it is difficult for a disempowered African American ex-offender working through the desistance process to balance performing an aggressive, hypermasculine “prisoner” persona and performing a more benevolent, vulnerable “backstage” persona. A hypermasculine “prisoner” wants to be dominant in a context by demonstrating his power. If the ex-offender understands a benevolent, omnipresent father figure as holding the power, it behooves the ex-offender to defer to that figure. The desire to appease that figure, in this case God, may give an ex-offender a more positive recourse. Furthermore, trusting in that figure provides ex-offenders with a source of strength and protection outside themselves.

While, given these participants’ context, it may be expected that most spiritual narrative shifts involve conversion to Christianity, this was not always the case. Latrobe (#7) explicitly identified reading the Qur’an as a religious practice he engages in, and also discussed his longtime disillusionment with Christianity; this may suggest that in order to make a proper narrative shift, some ex-offenders may need to be exposed to religious practices which they have less of an established history with.

Honestly, my belief in God, man. I never believed in-- like Christianity. I didn’t believe in God. I never had chance to believe in that. I lived the devil’s life. But I was introduced to God. I would look at people, read the Bible, and I didn’t want to be around those kinds of people. But then because I was like, all are funny, I never-- I looked at it like it wasn’t real. But then once I started believing in God, reading the Quran, and someone took me and showed me, and explained to me how important it is to pray, and how important it is to

believe in God, that changed my whole demeanor. It calmed me down a lot. Once you believe in a higher power, it puts you in a situation where, Oh, now I believe. (Latrobe #7)

When ex-offenders are given an opportunity to learn a new system of belief and incorporate it into their lives, they are given a very concrete opportunity to create a narrative shift. The process of religious conversion contains a “narrative script” of its own, likely similar to Maruna’s (2001) “redemption script.” In this study, the desistance process is dichotomous with the narrative script being a vehicle for primary desistance but is dependent upon the sociogenic process to enter the phase of secondary desistance.

### *3. Re-appropriation of Gang Ideology*

Some participants indicated that re-appropriating already-internalized lessons and concepts from gang literature was an effective way of spurring primary desistance. The Vice Lords, of which 13 of the 15 participants were a member of at one point in time, have sets of laws and principles based in Islamic principles, which have governed their actions. One of the major elements of Vice Lord iconography and law is the five-point star; the points of this star signify love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice, which Vice Lords contend are five things every man is searching for in life. Lexington stated,

I believe that we all are called to be advocates of that which we dislike the most in the world, and I’m an advocate of suicide, drug addiction. Because I’m a certified drug recovery specialist. I am re-entry coach. I work with violence prevention. Then I volunteer, whether it be to help the elderly-- you know what I mean? It’s about building. And you know what’s crazy? That’s what the literature in the gang that I was in saying to do. And you know what I tell people? I tell them, Hey, listen, man. The gang I belonged to, or the street organization, they say love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice, and that that was the essence of men. If you’re not in pursuit of that, you would conflict yourself, right? But those principles can’t be argued with. Love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice. Listen, I was a terrible Vice Lord back then because they didn’t tell me to sell drugs. And I don’t glorify that because it got infiltrated - you know, greed and different things or whatever - just like any other organization. The GD brothers, I think, is there for love, life, loyalty, and wisdom and the heart to understand, and how can you argue with that?



Vice Lords also use symbols, like the top hat, which represents a means of detaching the essence of the individual from his physical cravings and material concerns.

The hat represents the covering over our head so we're able to cleanse our mind, stop allowing our physical cravings like our anger, our lust, our greed, our jealousy to control how we act and how we think as man. We put mind over matter, so I would use Vice Lord literature to raise the little brothers. (Lemoyne #15)

The core tenets of these philosophies are highly amenable to personal reform, but to constructively channel these philosophies, participants created a new framework with which to consider them. By reorienting one's thinking towards serving the community at large rather than just serving the community of Vice Lords, participants were able to create a narrative shift which allowed primary desistance to occur. Additionally, because many ex-offenders in the Chicago area were Vice Lords applying the same interpretive strategies to Vice Lord literature, the reassertion of a common narrative allowed productive relationships between ex-offenders to be forged. This philosophical re-appropriation allowed some participants to turn a "criminal script" into a "redemption script."

#### *4. Spiritual Communities*

Some participants indicated that the prosocial bonds they had developed with church communities helped them distance themselves from their criminal identity and reach secondary desistance. Leamington (#4) and Lockwood (#8) both indicated that regular attendance at church helped them keep an important sense of routine and helped them stay accountable to their transformation. Lockwood stated,

I was going to church. You know what I'm saying? Just staying in the moment, ...I think for about six months, mentally, I was preparing myself. I had to make me a set schedule. And church

was going to be one of them, and stick to this, do this. And I basically stuck to my game plan.

By participating in church, the participants were able to regularly be in the company of non-offenders and incorporate their faith into their conception of their identity. With regular church attendance, the prominence of this new, faith-based identity comes to overtake one's identity as an offender. Spiritual communities are the people, their culture, their normative behaviors, and their interactions. Whereas spirituality is an individual's relationship with God, his understanding of His percepts, and how his relationship with God impacts his life.

### *5. Emotional and Psychological Fatigue*

Some participants indicated that the emotional and psychological tolls that being in prison took on them were enough to cause a narrative shift. Orienting their thinking towards the pain and torment of incarceration allowed these ex-offenders to use the fear of returning to prison as a deterrent. Lockwood (#8) cited the desire to not return to jail as the primary reason for avoiding toxic situations and people that may potentially put him in a risky situation.

No, but mentally I was just drained with the jail thing. But jail has helped me a lot because I know I don't want to go there. So I try to avoid a situation, places, people that'll put me in a situation where I might go there. (Lockwood #8)

For some ex-offenders, the suffering, inhumane treatment, being stripped of all their rights, and separation from their love ones is powerful and effective enough to cause a narrative shift.

### *2. Secondary (Maintaining) Desistance - Sociogenic*

In my literature review, I drew upon Maruna and Farrall's (2004) concept of secondary desistance, which is the point in time when an individual no longer understands himself as an offender. Through the interviews I conducted, I sought to identify how African American male

ex-offenders in Chicago came to reach the stage of secondary desistance. In interviews, participants described the different interpersonally based support systems which allowed secondary desistance to continually occur. This characterization aligned with various assertions made by scholars. Hirishi (1972) theorized that strong, positive social bonds are necessary for individuals to avoid committing crimes, and Maruna (2001) suggested that offenders' utilization of prosocial self-images allows them to create a new identity, estranged from their criminal past.

Most participants reached secondary desistance when they understood prosocial support systems as noticing and supporting their post-carceral progress. As such, when discussing secondary desistance, five subthemes recurred, all of which acted as prosocial support systems for participants: *family, job in violence prevention, role models, and peer support*.

#### *1) Family*

Some participants indicated that the prosocial bonds they had developed with their families helped foster significant support during the desistance process; these bonds ultimately allowed participants to shift their understanding of their own identities. In some cases, this manifested as ex-offenders taking greater responsibility for their family members. Long (#10) described taking care of his large family as a means of both renewing his commitments to his family's ongoing safety and keeping his focus on a positive goal. Lavergne's (#2) aforementioned primary desistance story, in which he made a promise to his son that the family would never have to sleep at a homeless shelter, acts similarly to Long's; in both cases, the men resolved to make an active attempt to work on behalf of their families. In both cases, the participants made a change by focusing on the prosocial practices consistent with what Shammas (2014) calls the "background" persona. The men foster existent familial bonds to foreground the prosocial identity of "family man," consistent with Maruna's (2001) assertion that prosocial self-

images help ex-offenders create new, positive identities. These shifts in identity allowed them to continue to avoid reoffending.

Some participants discuss a desire to keep their family members from experiencing the pains of knowing a loved one is incarcerated.

Well, my mother, first of all, when she was living. When I did come home, and when she used to come visit me, she was always telling me, you don't have to worry about me ever come visiting you again when you come home if you go back. So that's something that stuck with me because I love my mother and I respect her. She was the world to me. And I just knew I never want to go back. I knew I didn't want to go back under no circumstances..... My mother just had a—she just had an impact, and we were a close family. There's seven of us, and we were a close family. And I think she just had an impact on all of us. Just, you know, the respect. And then just not wanting to let her down, even at the time when she was living when I was out. It's a possibility, me going out there, going back probably could have killed her - you know what I'm saying? - just for the stress of it because she loved her children. And stuff like this-- I thought about a lot of things. So I think this was defining moments of having talked to her, and then, along the way, having some guys that kind of mentored me through, and just seeing what was going on, and just knowing that that wasn't what I wanted anymore. (Lotus # 11)

Lotus (#11) discussed his strong relationship with his mother, who threatened to not visit him if he ever had to return to prison. Lotus understood the gravity of this threat and the stress that his incarceration put on his mother; this acted as a constant reminder to stay away from crime. Lotus' new realization of how to honor his relationship with his mother allowed him to understand himself as a non-offender. Here, the prosocial relationship Lotus had with his mother allowed him to distance himself from his identity as a criminal, and instead led him to focus on his identity as a son. Lotus' focus on his familial identity allowed him to foreground a more positive, pro-social persona; this is also consistent with Maruna's (2001) assertion that prosocial self-images help ex-offenders create new, positive identities.

*b. Jobs in violence prevention*

Some participants indicated that the prosocial bonds they had developed by working a job in violence prevention had helped them meaningfully recontextualize their identities during the desistance process.

I'll be down and feeling out. When I come to work, I'll be happy as hell, bro, because I'm doing something that I like doing. I'm finna to help somebody. You know what I'm saying? So man, work, my job, is my biggest motivation right now. (Lawler #12)

Jobs in violence prevention allowed participants to draw upon their past experiences with crime to show those who were either committing crimes or those at-risk to commit crimes the folly of their past ways; ultimately, this allows ex-offenders to share their narrative shifts, reflect on the problems with their past thinking, demonstrate to others the progress which they have made, and contribute to a community which holds them accountable to their new identity. For example, LaPorte (#5) described how his new identity as an advocate for nonviolent conflict resolution continually forces him to avoid using violence. LaPorte said that through his violence prevention job, he became a role model; if he were to act violently, he would be a hypocrite who let down those who look up to him. LaPorte's new identity as a role model for nonviolent conflict resolution allows him to view himself as a non-offender, keeps him accountable to the desistance process, and keeps him aware of the mistakes he has made.

By developing and reflecting upon their desistance narratives, participants can better internalize them. By giving participants a space in which to productively utilize those internalized counter-narratives through working with at-risk people, participants begin to understand themselves more as positive role models of successful desistance rather than as offenders. This allows participants' pasts to be understood as assets rather than burdens. For

example, Long (#10) said, “Now I get to interact with people out in the world that went through what I went through. And not only that, now I been equipped with a tool.” Long’s criminal narrative gives him the authenticity to effectively communicate with current offenders, but his desistance narrative allows him to effect change by acting as a role model, who turned his negative story into a positive asset.

*a. Role models*

Some participants indicated that the prosocial bonds they had developed with role models and mentors who were further along in the desistance process helped them build new, positive identities. The process of reacquainting to mainstream society from prison is not necessarily intuitive; Leamington (#4) and Laramie (#6) both discussed how their respective relationships with ex-offender role models gave them concrete examples of how to disengage from former habits and behaviors while also staying true to themselves. Leamington stated,

And man, these guys really showed me another way how you could be cool, still wear what you like to wear, smell how you like to smell with different fragrances, and still get some money, still make jokes, and not be in the street and actually get more money than the guys in the street, whether it’s over a period of time or whatever. But I had some great examples, man.

Furthermore, Laramie said,

Yeah, I have a few good mentors. I have a few-- I have a good friend that’s kind of the catalyst for all of us who went through this prison system and trying to make it in this system, which is considered the free world. A blueprint, you’ve got to have a blueprint, man. You’ve got to have something that you can see and something that you can aspire to do, and that’s what’s been keeping me going. That’s what’s been driving me.

Leamington and Laramie both described their mentors as giving them concrete examples of how to build wealth through legitimate means, which helps disincentivize reoffending. By utilizing these concrete models of desistance, ex-offenders can have a clear standard by which

they can judge their own progress; as Leamington and Laramie emulated the behaviors of their role models, they were able to progressively distance themselves from their criminal identities and instead understand themselves as successful non-offenders.

*b. Peer support*

Some participants indicated that the prosocial bonds they had developed with friends who had gone through the criminal justice system helped them create a framework for understanding what desistance may look like. While there are clear commonalities between “peer support” and “role models,” for the purposes of this discussion, “peer supporters” are those who were associated with the participant before and/or during their incarceration while “role models” are those who only knew the participant after they had been released from prison. “Peer supporters” do not necessarily take an active role in helping the participant, but their examples and encouragement become meaningful to the participant. Lotus (#11) discussed how watching his ex-offender peers make active, successful efforts towards avoiding prison and building new lives showed him what successful desistance looked like. Lotus understood that by emulating the changes that his peers made, he could distance himself from his criminal identity and become a successful non-offender. Peer support differed from role models due to their stage of advancement in the desistance process and transformation process. Role models were well into their maintenance phase of the desistance process, usually older, procured employment or a formal education, and looked more like a finished product. Whereas peers were individuals who had recently desisted and were positively making progress toward secondary desistance and where more comparable in their journey with individuals who were in the early stage of their desistance process.

*3. Pains of Desistance*

In my literature review, I discussed Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) concept of "pains of desistance." Nugent and Schinkel (2016) identified these "pains" as pain of isolation, pain of goal failure, and pain of hopelessness. Pain of isolation refers to the loneliness ex-offenders experience upon returning home and having to keep themselves separate from crime-affiliated friends, police officers, and other high-risk situations (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Pain of goal failure refers to the frustration of repeatedly being denied employment and the denial of relational desistance (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). The pain of hopelessness stems from the ex-offender accepting the limitations that society has imposed on him and giving up on reformation (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

In the interest of expanding upon Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) contributions, I sought to identify different "pains" outside of/contributing to this established scope which were relevant to the experiences of the African-American men who participated in this study. When discussing these "pains," three subthemes recurred: inequities in the criminal justice system, lack of financial resources, and PTSD.

### *Obstacles*

#### *Criminal justice system*

Some participants indicated that experience-based perceptions of the biases the American criminal justice system has against African American men acted as an ongoing source of desistance-related pain. As discussed in the literature review, some people in African American communities are often deeply anti-establishment due to the history of racism and marginalization against them (Boggess & Hipp, 2010; Glynn, 2013). Latrobe stated,

Now, that's a different story because the way it's designed, it's not for the African American male to ever see the fair side of justice. Our constitution was written with racist intent. It's still no-win today in 2020, and we're not collaborating enough to try and change



these truths, like the 13th Amendment. Why is that even-- why has that not changed? They still have Confederate flags flying on state buildings today, so no, my thoughts on the judicial systems is, in a nutshell, it needs work.

A distrust in the American criminal justice system due to its racist history is profoundly felt by the participants. Latrobe (#7) discussed many societal instances of American racism but focused in on the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in particular, which stipulates that slavery and involuntary servitude are only acceptable as punishments for a crime. Latrobe discussed how the text suggests that the reason there is a disproportionate proportion of African American men in the criminal justice system is because the state is trying to continue the practices of slavery through mass incarceration. This is a highly demoralizing idea; it suggests that justice cannot and will never be served to the African American community and suggests that no matter how long an African American ex-offender desists for, he cannot ever escape being viewed as a criminal. The persistent specter of America's racist history is, for African American ex-offenders, a "pain of desistance."

As Miller (2014) asserted, high unemployment, poverty, and lack of resources are all major contributors to the challenges faced by participants who reside in the west-side of Chicago. Leamington (#4) and Lorel (#9) both spoke to the economic manifestations of the criminal justice system's biases. Leamington asserted his perception that wealthier people tended to receive more lenient sentences. Lorel stated,

I think the criminal justice system is not set up for young African American men to win. Right? I think it's they use these young brothers as examples. Right? You look at some of the cases and the high-profile cases, right, I think everything is so glorified, and then when they get caught, they don't talk about that part. So I think the criminal justice system, I don't think it's for us. I think it's best to try to stay out of it. Okay. So as far as my first case I caught, they gave me probation when I was 17, probation, but didn't give 1410 probation that can be expunged. Right? So they just, they didn't break it down enough for a 17-year-old who only saw the law, for real, on TV. So going into the system, it was

nothing there to-- we felt like my public defender, because I had a public defender on my first case. Right? Of course, parents couldn't afford a lawyer. So but my public defender, I felt like he was working with the state to basically get me to take whatever plea they can get me to take to keep me from even growing later on in life. I felt like I was set up. I don't feel like it was just due for the crime I committed.

Lorel discussed how the public defender which he received while being tried in his first case was more interested in encouraging him to take a plea deal from the state than putting in the effort to clear him of the charges. Lorel's account speaks to Leamington's assertion; without proper financial resources, access to fair legal representation is essentially out of reach for many of these men. This is a highly demoralizing understanding, further suggesting that justice is essentially unavailable to African American men, and acts as another "pain of desistance."

#### *Lack of resources*

Some participants indicated that their challenges in securing employment led to a profound lack of resources, which created an economic pain of desistance. The economic challenges in the African American community, compounded by the limited employment opportunities for ex-offenders compounds the pain of hopelessness and led some participants to rely on others for financial support (Miller, 2014; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Lamon stated,

Bro, real talk, I went back to what I knew. I didn't have no-- the only thing I got, for real, was a Link card, bro, and a medical card from the state. Other than that, bro, I went back to cutting hair.... Bro, I'm not going to say none don't exist because I just might not know about it, but I don't see none.

Also, Lorel went on to say,

The local church my mother went to, but they didn't set me up for any resources or anything to help me to transform my thinking. It was just my mother hooking me up with the church and Sunday service [laughter], yeah, Sunday service, but it wasn't like no financial stability or none of that stuff. It was just like come to church. We could pray, having my mom put oil on me in my sleep [laughter] and waking up just quiet. You see it, but you just; What is

she doing? So I remember them just saying, trying to cast this demon off of me. Right [laughter]? But I went through that, so really nothing, so.

Both Lamon (#1) and Lorel (#9) discussed being given no substantive information on economic resources to help reestablish themselves, both expressed disillusionment and confusion with this situation. In the case of Latrobe (#7), this situation was particularly challenging from the perspective of desistance; the people Latrobe was looking for financial support from were people he knew prior to his incarceration that were involved in criminal activity. While Latrobe did not re-offend because of this circumstance, his financial precarity meant that he could have been convinced into ultimately reoffending. The lack of economic support resources for ex-offenders amplifies the pain of hopelessness.

### *PTSD*

Lemoyne indicated that he had experienced significant trauma as a part of his experience in the criminal justice system, and, consequently, became a sufferer of post-traumatic stress disorder.

I had the incident with the white kids at the school and ended up in juvenile court, and the judge asked my parents if they want me to go to school. And of course, my parents said yes, but they didn't know, out of ignorance, that they were finna to send me away. They thought I was going to come home, and being young, I felt my parents had betrayed me, and I felt the system had betrayed me. And it was really a traumatic experience when I look back. In retrospect, I was traumatized because here I am at 15 years old in a juvenile maximum-security prison in Joliet, and I had heard stories about guys getting raped in the [inaudible]. And I vowed I'd kill somebody if they tried me, but I never had killed nobody.

As Glynn (2018) discussed, convicted criminals generally experience traumas before, during, and after imprisonment. This is especially the case for those who live in an impoverished African American community like the participants in this study; cycles of poverty and violence, coupled with a lack of institutional support, lead many residents of these communities to

experience repeated trauma. All of the participants in this study were certainly exposed to traumatic events (imprisonment, violence, addiction, abuse etc.); although only one participant volunteered the information that he was a PTSD sufferer, it may be the case that other participants have been similarly challenged by struggles with PTSD. Dealing with the lasting impacts of trauma can be a lifelong struggle and can limit an ex-offender's abilities to lead healthy lifestyles and engage in productive pro-social relationships.

#### *4. Participants' View of Successful Desistance*

In my literature review, I explored the concept of "successful desistance" and what it means to successfully avoid reoffending. Most theorists understand desistance to be a gradual process of decreasing criminal activity, with various stops, starts, and reconfigurations; while the ultimate goal is permanent, complete cessation of criminal behaviors, it is unclear if this is a proper metric for determining "successful desistance" (Maruna, 2001; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Fagan, 1989). While not committing crimes certainly helps ex-offenders achieve primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance, it does not necessarily act as the sole metric for desistance to feel "successful." I asked participants what they understood as constituting "successful desistance" in order to help determine what type of metric could be used to understand "successful desistance" in their context.

##### *a. Abstinence from crime*

Many participants indicated that complete abstinence from committing crimes is the effective measure of determining successful desistance. Lexington stated,

A successful ex-offender. A number of things. One, self-healing. Moving towards wholeness, right? Knowing these substances is a tying down of the spirit. Character building. Right? Gainful employment. Training and professional development. Healing relationships with the children,

with the mother, with their parents. Right? Productive member of society. Paying the taxes. Completely gone from committing crimes.

Lexington (#14) suggests that, in addition to building character and positive relationships, being “completely gone from committing crimes” is a necessary element of successful desistance. Contrary to the literature’s perspective of successful desistance being a decline in criminal behavior, the participants believe successful desistance means complete abstinence from crime and is an attainable state for ex-offenders.

*b. Giving back*

Several participants indicated that giving back to the community is an effective measure of determining successful desistance. Long stated,

When I see someone working, holding onto a stable job, plus giving back in the community. That’s one, most definitely. I got to see giving back in the community. Because, real talk, anybody that’s been locked up and really reformed, they see the truth out there of what’s going on. And if you ain’t reaching back out, trying to give back, you ain’t reformed. You still already institutionalized.

Long (#10) understood giving back to the community as a sign of “true reformation”; he claimed that giving back to the community demonstrates a coherent understanding of the systems which keep carceral cycles active, and a desire to act on this knowledge for the benefit of the whole community. This is corroborated by the literature; LeBel et al. (2015) describes how the ex-offenders who are attracted to/feel fulfilled by “wounded healer” work find such work meaningful because it allows them a chance to repay their debts to society, and to their communities. Thus, it follows that participants in this study would understand helping others in their communities as a necessary element of giving back. Additionally, Linder (#13) states,

And just help people. Help people when you can. Now, when we start helping people. Now, we're staying to help because that's one of the things that I have witnessed in life is-- one of the commandments of the creator, that if you help people, He'll continue to help you. I'm not a real, real spiritual, this pious person, but I know that's one thing that has been working in my life.

Linder (#13) discussed giving back to the community as a way of honoring one's religious convictions. This again demonstrates the importance of spirituality in the desistance narratives of many participants.

### *c. Employment*

Several participants indicated that gainful employment is an effective measure of determining successful desistance. Latrobe asserts,

To see somebody be able to fix his credit, to get him a job, and build a family. That's successful, because to do all three of those you got to be free. So if you can get them three components, in my mind you successful. Everybody say they want to be rich. What is rich? What is rich? What is poor? That's a state of mind.

Existing scholarship supports the idea that those from areas with high levels of unemployment are more likely to offend, and one of the main "pains of desistance" stems from the challenges continual unemployment presents, it follows that gainful employment would be a means of determining successful desistance (Glynn, 2013; Gleuck & Gleuck, 1940; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Latrobe (#7) and Lockwood (#8) both asserted that gainful employment is a concrete demonstration of successful desistance; in essence, they claimed that if an ex-offender molds himself into an industrious and scrupulous man, he has demonstrated a remarkable sense of discipline, honor, and resolve, and can be understood to be successful at desistance.

The content above was produced by thematic analysis gathered from the qualitative interviews conducted with African American men who work in violence prevention and live on

the west side of Chicago in the Austin, East Garfield, and North Lawndale communities. In sharing their experiences, they defined their desistance process, pains suffered during their journey, and their perception of successful desistance. The information shared by participants has given us a deeper understanding of their desistance experiences and hopefully will lead to further research into African American male ex-offender transformative lifestyle process into a pro-social way of living. Through the accounts of these subjects' experiences, certain concepts regarding support systems, personal narrativization, and shifts in identity have been identified; these can be positively utilized to develop further desistance-related knowledge. In discussing desistance, it is important to give ex-offenders the space and vocabulary for discussing their challenges, setbacks, and the limits of their existent support systems.

## 5. Discussion

This qualitative study explored the desistance process of African American ex-offenders from communities on the west side of Chicago who currently work in violence prevention. During the in-depth interviews, I sought to unpack the experiences and lift the voices of those with direct experience of the phenomenon of desistance, which has yet to be fully explored in the literature. The study is very significant because it captures the pathway for a crime free lifestyle for the largest proportionality of the incarcerated population. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2020) in 2018 there were 5.8 times more African American males imprisoned than white males. Yet, the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) indicates that of the more than 328 million people in the United States only 13.4% of the population is African American compared to 76.3% (5.7 times more) of the population that is white. Due to socio-economic factors, institutional racism, and the high volume of crime in marginalized communities throughout the United States the African American desistance process is different than what has been identified in the previous studies.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

#### 1. *Study Findings vis-a-vis Desistance Process (Primary and Secondary)*

In the literature review, I discussed the three most studied accounts of the desistance process: the maturation process (life course theory), the sociogenic process (social bond theory, and the narrative shift process (identity-based model). The maturation process suggests that people mature or age out of maladaptive behaviors biologically (development of the frontal cortex) and as they procure social bonds (employment, marriage, children etc.; Sampson & Laub, 2005). Inversely, the sociogenic process purports that social bonds and capital can be obtained at



any age in the offender's life and leads to a crime free lifestyle. Lastly, the narrative shift posits that an internal shift in offender's thinking is the catalyst for him or her transition into a life free of crime. In this study, the participants expressed that their desistance process was initiated through a change in their thinking (primary desistance) and maintained by acquiring or possessing social bonds and capital (secondary desistance).

## 2. *Study Findings vis-a-vis the Identity-Based Desistance Model*

In my literature review, when I examined the narrative shift, I drew heavily on Maruna's (2001) model of desistance, in which ex-offenders can successfully desist by shifting the identity they perform through a change in self-narrativization. When ex-offenders reframe the narrative arc of their lives to focus on their redemption from past criminality rather than their ongoing criminal behavior, they are afforded the ability to assume a new, non-criminal identity (Maruna, 2001). Findings in this study support the notion that narrative-based shifts in identity are paramount to ex-offenders' entrance into the desistance processes. Two themes in my findings are relevant to Maruna's (2001) Identity-Based Desistance Model: *Reassessment of thinking patterns prompting narrative shift* and *reassessment of relationship to belief structures prompting narrative shift*.

### a. *Reassessment of thinking patterns prompting narrative shift*

Of the participants, 7 indicated that reassessing the thought patterns they had internalized surrounding criminality, prison, and their negative behaviors allowed them to bring about a narrative shift which led to primary desistance. All the participants started their desistance process while incarcerated and continued the behavior upon their release. Yet, due to the definition of desistance in the literature and the ambiguity surrounding its genesis, it is questionable if the participants can be credited with beginning the process in prison. The

restricted accessibility of many potential crimes, consistent monitoring, and confinement restrains and impedes an ex-offender's ability to choose to persist in crime. Therefore, it would be difficult to determine if the participants have entered into primary desistance and had an authentic reassessment of thinking patterns under these conditions. However, the evidence that a narrative shift began in prison can be suggested based upon the participant's continued behavior upon release. There were two emerging subthemes identified through such discussions with participants: 1) cognitive shifts, and 2) emotional/psychological fatigue.

### *I. Cognitive Shifts*

Some participants identified changes in thought processes surrounding their behavior as experiences which profoundly helped them begin the desistance process. The nature of these "thought processes" were varied; 3 participants cited material examples of behavior shifts, while 4 others spoke more abstractly about adopting different mindsets. For example, Lamon stated,

I made up my mind before I left prison. I knew that I never wanted to ever go inside a prison again. I didn't need to do 15 years, bro. The first day they had got me before they sentenced me. I said, Okay, if I'm never going to come to prison again, what am I going to do to prepare myself never to come to prison again?

Lamon's way of thinking shifted in the midst of his incarceration and mentally he began to prepare for a path of desistance. Other participants decided to focus their efforts towards avoiding the habits which had previously gotten them incarcerated; this cognitive shift allowed participants to understand their "life script" as one of self-improvement and begin the desistance process. LeClaire said,

Then, one day, I just woke up and said, "Nah, let me start changing my life a little bit." And different things changed as I was in there, had a whole lot of deaths and all that. So the days started changing for me, where I started just doing my research, educating myself to be a better person. Because I knew, at a certain time, I'm not going to have anything when I come out, so I'm going to have to rebuild. So it was a change of days then. It was like, "Nah, let me go to school and get a certification in this. Let me learn how to do this.

Let me educate myself on that, so I don't have to pay nobody to do it for me. I can at least do this for myself.

Some participants understood shifts in motivation as a means of changing their behavior; by accepting constructive commitments from their families and themselves to drive their behavior, participants were able to begin the desistance process.

## *II. Emotional/Psychological Fatigue*

Some participants identified exhaustion from incarceration as an experience which helped them begin the desistance process. Participants cited the mental toll that alienation from loved ones, inhumane treatment, and lack of freedom took on them as a profound deterrent from participating in criminal behavior. This avoidance allowed participants to begin the desistance process. Lockwood said, “Mentally I was just drained with the jail thing. But jail has helped me a lot because I know I don't want to go there. So, I try to avoid a situation, places, people that'll put me in a situation where I might go there.”

Furthermore, the traumatization associated with incarceration left the participants with mental scars that evoked painful memories and reminders. Laverne describes, “I mean, I got to be traumatized when I saw a guy running down the gallery with his stomach hanging open. So it wasn't like the guy I told you about I seen shoot a gun when I was a kid ...I was just like this ain't normal.” The fear of potentially partaking in similar experiences are emotionally draining and more powerful than the desire to participate in criminal behavior. The participant is psychologically weary after several failures and arrests or serving a long sentence.

### *b. Reassessment of relationship to belief structures prompting narrative shift*

Some participants indicated that reassessing their relationships with a particular organizations' belief structures allowed them to bring about a narrative shift which led to primary desistance. Two emerging subthemes were identified through discussions with

participants: re-appropriation of gang ideology and spiritual shifts. All the participants had gang affiliation in their past and were very familiar with the dogma and tenets associated with it. The essence of the gang ideology was constructive and positive if implement in the manner it was written. The focus was achieving the highest personal human qualities known to humankind and being an asset in your community.

### *I. Re-appropriation of Gang Ideology*

Some participants indicated that the philosophies and practices espoused by the Chicago-based Vice Lords gang could be re-appropriated into a self-improvement philosophy completely divorced from participation in gang crime. Thirteen of the fifteen study participants were Chicago Vice Lords at a point in time, meaning that knowledge of the Vice Lords' laws and principles was widespread across participants. By recontextualizing an established set of internalized laws and principles to make them cohere as self-improvement strategies, some participants were able to use those strategies to begin the desistance process. The following comments are intriguing statements made by participants referring to their thoughts about their previous gangs. LaPorte said, "With the gang that I was in. I hung out with gang members, people that I trusted that had my back." Laramie stated, "I don't like to call them 'gangs', but I was a part of an organization, yes, a brotherhood. Yes, I was." Lorel reflected and said,

The one thing I can't admit is I was part of the organization. One thing I can't admit about that organization, man. If you were in school, you couldn't hustle and sell drugs at school hours; you got to be in school. And if you got caught by the school, and you supposed to be in school, ah, man, there was repercussion behind that. I kind of liked it, that, because it kept the pressure on me going to school. I really do believe if they didn't have that type of foundation, I would've probably dropped out of school way earlier than what I did. Most definitely, I know I would've.

Finally, LeMoyne said, "The Vice Lord literature really gave me a frame of reference about us being Vice Lords. I would use that to get the little guys to see themselves different." These

salient words by the participants provides a very different perspective about gangs and the potential role they can play in primary desistance. The research has been clear about the risk factors, criminogenic behaviors and danger that come with gang membership, but I was unable to locate literature that indicate gangs having positive characteristics potentially leading to protective factors. However, as insider, who participated in gang rituals and studied literature, I can attest to Vice Lord dogma being grounded in Islamic religious beliefs. Furthermore, many members study the Quran and are able to recite the opening prayer in Arabic.

## *II. Spiritual Shifts*

Some participants indicated that reconnecting with established religious beliefs was a means of bringing about primary desistance. Deferring to a higher power has several positive implications for ex-offenders trying to start the desistance process. Religious adherence, for many ex-offenders, functions as a means of reconnecting with a legitimate paternal authority which can simultaneously hold participants accountable to potential misdeeds, provide a framework for forgiving those misdeeds, and encourage positive relationships and support systems to form. Participants discussed ascribing to both Christianity and Islam; one participant discussed conversion from Christianity to Islam as a means of creating a narrative shift through learning the traditions, beliefs, and philosophies of a new religion. The presence of religion in these participants' lives allowed them to shift their self-narrative away from criminality and towards religious devotion, allowing primary desistance to occur.

## *3. Study Findings vis-a-vis the Sociogenic Desistance Model*

In my literature review, I discussed Maruna and Farrall's (2004) model of sociogenic desistance, in which ex-offenders' prosocial bonds and social support systems allow them to no longer understand themselves as offenders. Hirishi (1972) found that strong prosocial bonds are a

key element of crime prevention, and Maruna (2001) found that ex-offenders with strong prosocial bonds were able to forge a new identity for themselves, separated from criminality. Findings in this study support the notion that creating and maintaining meaningful prosocial bonds are an important part of ex-offenders' secondary desistance processes. Two themes in my findings are relevant to Maruna and Farrall's (2004) model of sociogenic desistance: *creating sociogenic bonds with non-offending communities* and *creating sociogenic bonds with other ex-offenders*.

#### *I. Creating sociogenic bonds with non-offending communities*

Some participants indicated that strengthening their relationships with communities completely divorced from the carceral experience, such as their families and religious communities, helped them reach secondary desistance. Participants indicated that their experiences with these positive social groups allowed them to reaffirm and prioritize their identity as members within those groups rather than as criminals. For example, some participants who cited their family communities as meaningful support systems during the desistance process found that over time, their identities as fathers became more significant parts of their self-perceptions than their identities as offenders. Laverne stated "I think I had a made-up mind and my vision, and my goals had changed. I understand that I was a father, that I had kids, that they were depending on me." Similarly, participants who cited involvement with church communities as important factors in their desistance process described their identities as members of their church communities or as adherents to their religions as more significant parts of their self-perception than their identities as offenders. In both cases, positive social communities allowed participants opportunities to build new identities as positive contributors to the lives of others; diligent work and meaningful relationships within these positive communities allowed

participants to reach secondary desistance, in which they no longer understood themselves as offenders.

## *II. Creating sociogenic bonds with other ex-offenders*

Some participants indicated that their social relationships with other ex-offenders helped them reach secondary desistance. Positive relationships between participants and other ex-offenders came about in several different sets of circumstances. In some cases, participants personally knew other ex-offenders from their lives before incarceration who were going through the desistance process; some participants were employed in violence prevention, working with at-risk youth and with other ex-offenders; and some participants intentionally met up with support groups with other ex-offenders who were further along in the desistance process. In all these circumstances, participants were given examples of successful desistance which they sought to emulate. By emulating and communicating with those successful at desisting about challenges they faced during the desistance process, participants developed both a concrete standard by which “desistance” could be judged and a truly empathetic support system.

Lexington stated,

I needed to be around some people who have struggled and went through what I have went through and have some levels of success, and I can feed off that. I really wasn't looking for nobody's opinion or advice. I was looking for some suggestions, and I found that in these men support groups that I started attending. So the people that I grew up with who went through the struggle that I went through have found a better way to live, and so I just took on the idea that, "Well, if you believe that you can do it, then I can too. So what I'm going to do is trust the process." Because I had believed a long time ago that I could do better. But was I willing to trust the process? Right? And that's a lot for somebody like me to turn it over to a process, and I'm not being the quarterback.

By understanding how desistance functions and by coming to understand other ex-offenders as successful at desisting, participants were able to have a stronger concept of how and when secondary resistance is reached.

#### 4. Study Findings regarding Obstacles to Desistance

In my literature review, I discuss Nugent and Shinkel's (2016) concept of "pains of desistance," three types of socio-emotional setback common to ex-offenders in the desistance process. These "pains" are "pain of isolation," "pain of goal failure," and "pain of hopelessness." "Pain of isolation" occurs when a desisting ex-offender can no longer associate with former criminal and social contacts; "pain of goal failure" occurs when an ex-offender is repeatedly denied employment; and "pain of hopelessness" stems from the sense of defeat a desisting ex-offender can feel when viscerally experiencing the societal limitations which have been imposed on him (Nugent & Shinkel, 2016). One theme is relevant to Nugent and Shinkel's (2016) "pains of desistance": *Economic inequality denying ex-offenders' access to opportunity.*

##### I. *Economic inequality denying ex-offenders' access to opportunity*

Some participants indicated that all three of Nugent and Shinkel's (2016) "pains of desistance" stemmed from two different manifestations of poverty. First, participants indicated that they experienced hopelessness when working through the criminal justice system because they could not afford access to high-quality legal representation. Participants expressed frustration with overworked pro bono lawyers who they understood as state employees trying to sell them into an unfair plea bargain. Participants viewed justice as essentially unattainable to them due to their inability to afford a proper lawyer committed to advocating for them. Lorel stated the following,

So as far as my first case I caught, they gave me probation when I was 17, probation, but didn't give 1410 probation that can be expunged. Right? So they didn't break it down enough for a 17-year-old who only saw the law, for real, on TV. So going into the system, it was no one there to help me - we felt like my public defender, because I had a public defender on my first case. Right? Of course, parents couldn't afford a lawyer. So but my public defender, I felt like he was working with the state to basically get me to take whatever plea they can get me to take to keep me from ever growing later on in life. I felt like I was set up. I don't feel like it was just due for the crime I committed.



Second, participants experienced “pain of goal failure” and “pain of isolation” while looking for employment after leaving prison. Repeated rejection from job applications led many participants to consider reoffending and to borrow money from family members and community organizations. Participants felt helpless, angry, and frustrated during their respective job search process. Without adequate economic resources, participants became repeatedly embittered and frustrated with the justice system, making the desistance process more challenging.

#### 5. *Study Findings regarding Conceptions of Successful Desistance*

In my literature review, I explored the concept of what “successful desistance” entails. While “total abstinence from crime for the duration of the ex-offender’s life” was considered to be the primary goal of desistance, it was unclear if this was the proper metric by which to characterize “successful desistance” (Fagan, 1989; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001). When discussing metrics for “successful desistance” with participants, three relevant themes occurred: *Abstinence from crime; giving back; and employment.*

##### *I. Abstinence from crime*

Some participants indicated abstinence from crime as a necessary standard for desistance. While this is not necessarily the sole metric by which desistance can be determined to be “successful,” it is worth mentioning that participants did view this goal as an attainable expectation. Lexington said,

A successful ex-offender. A number of things. One, self-healing. Moving towards wholeness, right? Knowing these substances is a tying down of the spirit. Character building. Right? Gainful employment. Training and professional development. Healing relationships with the children, with the mother, with their parents. Right? Productive member of society. Paying the taxes. Completely gone from committing crimes. Right? And that's not always easy to get down, but that's what it looks like though. You're looking at it right now.

## *II. Giving back*

Some participants indicated giving back to the community as an indicator of successful desistance. Participants indicated that by volunteering their time or money to the community, ex-offenders demonstrate remorse for the toxic behaviors they once exhibited, recognition of the positive impacts investment in one's community can have, and more broadly, comprehension of the cycles of crime which hinder community growth. Some participants also cited their religious beliefs and convictions as reasons why they engaged in charity work of this nature. Long summoned it up saying,

When I see someone working, holding onto a stable job, plus he is giving back to the community. That's one, most definitely. I got to see him giving back in the community. Because, real talk, anybody that's been locked up and really reformed, they see the truth out here and what's going on. And if you ain't reaching back out, trying to give back, you ain't reformed. You still institutionalized.

## *III. Employment*

Some participants indicated gainful, stable employment as an indicator of successful desistance. Participants described holding down a steady job as a demonstration of honor, self-discipline, and a desire to maintain a crime-free lifestyle. Having a steady job, participants argued, demonstrates that an ex-offender has recognized that he can productively assimilate into society, has recognized his place within society, and has recognized that his hard work can pay off.

### *A. Study Implications*

This study sought to explore how Chicago-based African American ex-offenders understand and reach successful desistance. Findings from this study can be used to inform how policymakers and criminal justice workers recognize and build effective systems of support for ex-offenders. This study's detailed personal accounts of desistance narratives and actionable

strategies for community building has excellent implications for decreasing recidivism among ex-offenders, particularly in the context of Chicago and for how to expand notions of justice and equality as they relate to the wider questions of social inclusion as well as access to material resources and opportunities.

This study's exploration of desistance-inducing support systems outside of the formal legal system and other state bureaucracies has meaningful implications for community-building practices. Participants' accounts of how reintegration into personally significant family and church communities acted as a powerful means of bringing about desistance emphasize the power of sociogenic approaches to desistance. Emphasizing the impacts that a caring, prosocial community can have on an ex-offender may allow for lawmakers to consider more holistically determined desistance approaches.

Findings also suggest that the various forms of oppression and marginalization imposed on African American community members in Chicago lead to tremendous legal and financial precarity. Policymakers and criminal justice workers may consider how taking steps to break the cycle of poverty through increased job placement programs could significantly help ex-offenders in the desistance process, could help limit recidivism rates, could reduce the more destructive dimensions of gangs, and could help build safer communities. These are tenacious communities which have been repeatedly targeted by systematic racism and poverty. By giving support to ex-offenders during their reintegration into society, a world of good is possible.

#### *B. Strengths and Limitations*

Strengths of this study include: 1) the addition of a distinct target population to desistance-related scholarship that has typically been neglected from the literature; 2) in-depth,

highly personal and detailed discussions of the experiences of African-American ex-offenders adding rich, qualitative nuance to existing accounts; 3) considerations for future research regarding successful desistance-related social, economic, and legal practices; and 4) a tremendous learning experience for me as a researcher and student.

Potential limitations of this study include demographic and geographical scope, as well as sample size. All the participants in this study were African American men and Chicago natives who held jobs in violence prevention. While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the points of view and experiences of these men, a study examining a different population or a study with a larger sample size may yield significantly different outcomes. Additionally, as an African American ex-offender from Chicago, my shared experiences with these men may have impacted their discursive modes, the information they chose to share, my persona during the interviews, and my understanding of the interviews (p45-46).

### *C. Future Research*

In the interest of reducing recidivism and empowering ex-offenders to contribute positively to their environments, future research is needed on the ways in which desistance narratives manifest in different regional contexts and demographic groups. Interdisciplinary studies drawing on psychology, economics, and sociology may help determine the design of desistance-related programs and literature to ensure that ex-offenders are properly supported while transitioning back into civilian life. Regarding topics discussed within this study, future research should analyze the practice of re-appropriating ideological tenets of gang literature and its implications for desistance programs. Also, the impact of the moral redemptive nature of spirituality or religious institution and their influence in the desistance process. Lastly, future

research should analyze the nature of sociogenic bonds between ex-offenders and their impacts on recidivism.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation attempted to explore the process of desistance in African American ex-offenders based in Chicago, focusing on their shifts in self-narrative, the support systems they used to avoid reoffending, and their perceptions of successful desistance. It sought to discover knowledge which would help create different positive methodologies for encouraging ex-offenders to avoid recidivism and become successful at desisting. Participants shared compelling personal narratives and compelling insights on desistance -- its challenges, its successes, and its origins. Findings from this dissertation suggest that further research must be done regarding shifts in personal narrativization, positive sociogenic relationships between ex-offenders, and creating a means of securing economic stability for ex-offenders to aid in the desistance process.

Furthermore, this study suggests that re-entry programs that are designed to assist client's entry into primary desistance or continue maintenance in secondary desistance must become familiar with the vehicles that allow you into these phases. The literature is unclear how much time must lapse before a person transitions from primary desistance to secondary desistance. The uniqueness of individuals and their rate of progress through the desistance process makes it difficult to make definite statements. Lastly, the role of substance use disorder and its role in the desistance process needs further exploration.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1) Where are you from and where did you grow up? Could you please tell me what that was like?

2) Can you describe your experiences that lead to your incarceration?

3) Tell me about your time in prison.

Probe: What were your days like?

Probe: What were your biggest challenges?

Probe: How did you mentally deal with incarceration?

4) What have been your experiences in staying out of prison?

Probe: Who/ what helped to keep you from returning to prison?

Probe: How did this make a difference?

Probe: What/who supports your ability to move forward? Probe: How are you able to keep yourself encouraged?

Probe: What is it about you – characteristics, qualities, assets – that have helped you to be successful and not return to prison?

Probe: How did you ‘bounce back’ – reintegrate – after being released from prison?

Probe: What/who motivates you to stay out of prison?

5) How did you cope with the trauma you experienced by being incarcerated? From an emotional perspective?

6) Who did you hang with when you left prison? Were they different from the same people you hung with while you were doing crime?

7) Could you please describe your day to day life and mindset growing up in Chicago prior to going to prison? Has it changed any? If so, How?

8) Tell me about some of your experiences in adjusting to society since being released from prison? Have you experienced any challenges, and if so, what are they?

9) What does the word “Community” mean to you?

10) Tell me what you think about your community and the role it has played in you not returning to prison?

11) What role has your job in violence prevention played in you staying crime free?

12) What is a successful life for an ex-offender?

## Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

I would like to invite you to participate in a semi-structured 90-minute interview. I hope you will be able to participate. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. Also, we work very hard to protect the identity of our participants. Any information that is obtained and that can be identified with you will remain confidential. Identifying information will be removed from our notes and files after interviews with you. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

If you have any questions or require further information, you may contact Chico Tillmon at [ctillm9@uic.edu](mailto:ctillm9@uic.edu) or 773-698-5206.

### **Signature of Participant**

I have read (or someone has read to me) the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I have been given a copy of this form.

The undersigned participant has consented to participate in observation sessions. The physical copy will be maintained in a locked, secured file cabinet until five years after the completion of the study, at which time it will be destroyed.

#### Participant Permission

By marking 'X' in each box below,

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my consent to the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in an interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have been given a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to have my interview digitally recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

### Appendix C: Organizations Considered for Participant Recruitment

<p>1) Build Inc. 5100 w Harrison St.  Chicago, Il. 60644 (773) 227-2880 Contact Person: Carmen</p>	<p>6) The Firehouse Community Arts Center 2111 S. Hamlin Chicago, Il. 60623 (773) 522-3473 Contact Person: Pastor Phil Jackson</p>
<p>2) Institute for Non-Violence 4926 W. Chicago Ave  Chicago, IL 60651 <a href="tel:7734177421">(773) 417-7421</a> Contact Person: Teny Gross</p>	<p>7) Metropolitan Family Services One North Dearborn, Suite 1000 Chicago, IL 60602 (312) 986-4000 Contact Person: Vanessa Perry</p>
<p>3) Cure Violence 1603 W. Taylor St., MC #923 Chicago, IL 60612 (312) 996-8775 Contact Person: Marcus McAllister</p>	<p>8) Sankofa Cultural Arts &amp; Business Center 5820 W Chicago Ave, Chicago, IL 60651 (773) 626-4497 Contact Person: Benny Lee</p>
<p>4) Heartland Alliance 208 S. LaSalle Suite 1300 Chicago, Il. 60604 (312) 660-1300 Contact Person: Marlon Chamberlain</p>	<p>9) Chicago CRED 300 E. Randolph, Suite 4030 Chicago, Illinois 60601 (773) 401-7197 Contact Person: Jalon Arthur</p>
<p>5) UCAN 3605 W. Fillmore Chicago, Il. 60624 (773) 588-0180 Contact Person: Dr. Nacole Milbrook</p>	<p>10) ALSO (Alliance of Local Services) 2401 W North Ave, Chicago, IL 60647 (773) 235-5705 Contact Person: Jorge Matos</p>

## **Appendix D: Information Letter for Agency Contacts**

Greetings!

My name is Chico Tillmon and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the school Criminology, Law, & Justice. My dissertation is focused on the experience of desistance among formerly incarcerated adult African American men. Given the lack of representation of African American men who have desisted represented in the literature on the subject, it is very important to learn about the experiences of African American men who have been to prison, but who have not gone back.

I am looking to interview individuals who meet the following criteria:

- ☐ Identify as an African American male;
- ☐ Are at least 25 years old;
- ☐ Have been convicted of at least one serious felony (drugs, violence, or weapons charges), not on probation or parole, does not have any open or unresolved charges
- ☐ Served at least one year in prison
- ☐ Are not involved in criminal activity for three years
- ☐ Reside in one of three communities (Austin, East Garfield / West Humboldt, and North Lawndale)

I am asking for interested men to take part in an interview to share how you have been successful in staying out of prison. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes and will be digitally recorded. Participants will be given a \$50 gift visa card as compensation for their participation. Meetings will take place at the work site or at 801 S. Financial in the Printer's Row area. Space for meeting will be provided at the organization and there is private office at 801 S. Financial. All information gathered will be strictly confidential. If you know of someone who you think meets the criteria above and might be interested in taking part in this study, I am asking you to share the attached flyer with him as well. I also request that you inform them: "If you choose to participate in this study, please do not tell me" and "non- participation will have no impact on services that you receive."

I am also available to meet or talk with you to answer any questions you may have about this study. I can be reached at (773) 698-5206. If you would like to verify what I have shared here, you can also contact a member of my dissertation committee, Jessica Bird, PhD. at (312) 877-3950.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request.

Kindest Regards

Chico Tillmon, PhD(c), MA

Doctoral Candidate, U.I.C. Criminology, Law, and Justice

### Appendix E: Criteria for Inclusion: Pre-Screen Checklist

Date of Inquiry:

Participant must answer 'YES' to all of the following criteria statements:

- |  |                |
|--|----------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I identify as a Black male.   | [ ] NO [ ] YES |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I am at least 25 years old.   | [ ] NO [ ] YES |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have at least one (1) felony conviction.  | [ ] NO [ ] YES |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I am not on probation or parole.  | [ ] NO [ ] YES |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I was discharged from a correctional facility.  |                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> (county, state, least five (5) years ago.   | [ ] NO [ ] YES |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have no open, unresolved charges.   | [ ] NO [ ] YES |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have not had any reconvictions or returned to prison<br>since getting out five or more years ago. | [ ] NO [ ] YES |

If inquiry meets ALL the criteria for participation, invite him to now schedule an interview. If he says yes, then schedule a date, time, and location for face to face interview. Remind him of his right to withdraw at any time.

Participant Name (participant to provide pseudonym)

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Contact Information

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to reach: \_\_\_\_\_

Appointment Time: \_\_\_\_\_

.



## Appendix F: Interview Protocol

### African American Criminal Desistance

Thank you again for taking part in this study. I really appreciate your willingness to share your experiences with me. That you have been successful in staying out of prison is very important and I am eager to learn about your experiences. I want you to feel comfortable to share and talk about your experiences in whatever way is meaningful to you. (Questions below may be asked in slightly modified ways to stimulate participant sharing of experiences.)

Question 1	Where are you from and where did you grow up? Could you please tell me what that was like?
Question 2	Can you describe your experiences that lead to your incarceration?
Question 3	<p>Tell me about your time in prison.</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> What were your days like?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> What were your biggest challenges?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> How did you mentally deal with incarceration?</p>
Question 4	<p>What have been your experiences in staying out of prison?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Who/ what helped to keep you from returning to prison?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> How did this make a difference?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> What/who supports your ability to move forward? <i>Probe:</i> How are you able to keep yourself encouraged?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> What is it about you – characteristics, qualities, assets – that have helped you to be successful and not return to prison?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> How did you ‘bounce back’ – reintegrate – after being released from prison?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> What/who motivates you to stay out of prison?</p>
Question 5	How did you cope with the trauma you experienced by being incarcerated? From an emotional perspective?
Question 6	Who did you hang with when you left prison? Were they different from the same people you hung with while you were doing crime?

Question 7	Could you please describe your day to day life and mindset growing up in Chicago prior to going to prison? Has it changed any? If so, How?
Question 8	Tell me about some of your experiences in adjusting to society since being released from prison? Have you experienced any challenges, and if so, what are they?
Question 9	What does the word “Community” mean to you?
Question 10	Tell me what you think about your community and the role it has played in you not returning to prison?
Question 11	What role has your job in violence prevention played in you staying crime free?
Question 12	What is a successful life for an ex-offender?
Question 13	Before we end, is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven’t talked about?

Thank you so much for your time and taking part in this interview. Your experiences are very important, and I really appreciate your sharing with me. If you have questions or need help with connecting with resources, please feel free to contact me.

### **Appendix G: Confidentiality Agreement Transcription Services**

I, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regard to any and all digital recordings and documentation received from Chico Tillmon related to his doctoral study on criminal desistance. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of digitally recorded interviews, or in any associated documents;
2. To not make copies of any digital recordings or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Chico Tillmon;
3. To store all study-related digital recordings and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;
4. To return all digital recordings and study-related documents to Chico Tillmon in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the digital recordings and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber's name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Transcriber's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Curriculum Vitae

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Chico A. Tillmon

## EDUCATION

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- 2021 Ph.D., Criminology, Law, & Justice at University of Illinois, Chicago, IL.
- 2014 Master of Arts, Inner-City Studies Education, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL
- 2013 Bachelor of Arts, Interdisciplinary Studies, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL

## RESEARCH PROJECTS

---

**Hidden Pathways:** *A study into the desistance process of African American men working in violence prevention* (2021)

## RESEARCH AND SPECIALIZATION

---

Intersectional Praxis; Desistance, Community Violence Intervention, Juvenile Justice; Community Engagement; Conflict Resolution, Mediating Conflicts (Groups & Individuals), Ecological Systems Theory, Mass Incarceration; Gang Violence; Restorative and Transformative Justice; Participatory Action Research;

## SELECTED PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS, INVITED

---

Tillmon, Chico (February 2016) “UIC Youth Summit Development” Harold Washington College, Chicago, IL

Tillmon, Chico (January 2016) “The Efficacy of the Public Health Approach to Violence” Israel Counsel General and Staff, Chicago, IL

Tillmon, Chico (January 2016) “The Efficacy of the Public Health Approach to Violence” University of Illinois @ Chicago Chancellor and members of his leadership team, Chicago, IL

Tillmon, Chico (November 2015) “The Efficacy of the Public Health Approach to Violence” Cure Violence Board of Directors & Key Donors, Chicago, IL

## UNIVERSITY GUEST LECTURES

---

Tillmon, Chico (2020, November) *Race & Police: Complexity of Policing Marginalized Communities* University of Wisconsin at Parkside

Tillmon, Chico (2020, October) *Criminal Justice: A Broken System that causes Disparity*  
Adler University

Tillmon, Chico (2019, November) *Homicide: The Impact of a Murder on the Entire Ecology*,  
University of Illinois at Chicago

Tillmon, Chico (2019, November) *Gangs & the Criminal Justice System*, University of  
Wisconsin at Parkside

Tillmon, Chico (2016, July) *Prevention & Intervention Strategies: A Public Health Approach to  
Quelling Violence*, Northwestern University

Tillmon, Chico (2016, April) *Gang Intervention: Mediating Conflicts Between Rival Gangs*,  
University of Illinois at Chicago Criminology, Law, & Justice Studies

Tillmon, Chico (2016, March) *Violence in Inner-City Communities: A comparative analysis  
between Violence in Chicago & the UK*, Middlesex University Department of  
Criminology, Birmingham England

Tillmon, Chico (2016, March) *Violence in Inner-City Communities: A comparative analysis  
between Violence in Chicago & the UK*, Birmingham City University, Birmingham  
England

Tillmon, Chico (2016, March) *Prevention & Intervention Strategies: A Public Health Approach  
to Quelling Violence*, University of Illinois at Chicago Criminology, Law, & Justice  
Studies

Tillmon, Chico (2015, November) *Prevention & Intervention Strategies: A Public Health  
Approach to Quelling Violence*, Loyola School of Social Work

Tillmon, Chico (2015, August) *How to Break Free: Desistance from Gangs*, DePaul University

## EMPLOYMENT

---

**University of Chicago Urban Labs**  
**April 2021 – Present**  
Senior Research Fellow

**Chicago, IL**

- Productively carry out self-directed research.
- Provide scientific and intellectual leadership to a portfolio of projects applying behavioral science to improve social conditions.
- Contribute to major project utilizing the mechanisms of “cognitive behavioral therapy.”
- Support the larger intellectual community of the Crime Lab by interacting with Crime Lab research staff and senior faculty members at the University of Chicago and elsewhere.
- Serve as a resource for collecting data and performing analysis.
- Contribute to facilitating and promoting a research project by providing scientific or intellectual information.
- Lead the contributions to scientific writing and publications, including protocols and grants.

**TASC Inc.**  
**June 2020 – April 2021**  
Director of Research & Evaluation

**Chicago, IL**

- Collaboratively, develop an agency-wide research and evaluation plan and strategy.
- Represent TASC expertise in local, state and national research partnerships.
- Oversee TASC's internal research and evaluation efforts.
- Oversee TASC participation in external research initiatives, inclusive of those with partner organizations.
- Oversee JCOIN staff and deliverables specific to translation of research, dissemination of research and stakeholder engagement
- Collect, analyze, and make recommendations using data from multiple sources that identify key measures of agency impact and performance.
- Ability to translate complex data analyses and research findings for practitioner audiences.
- Determine, recommend and seek research priorities based on agency interest; funding opportunity; and the availability of an appropriate research team.
- Supervise research assistants, ensuring accurate and timely data collection
- Conduct research on topics, existing and emerging, to provide briefs and summaries for both internal and external use including for TASC business development and marketing purposes.

**YMCA of Metro Chicago**  
**July 2017 – October 2019**  
Executive Director of Youth Safety & Violence Prevention

**Chicago, IL**

- Hire, train, and supervise staff. Facilitate team building exercises and design training programs
- Prepare funding grants along with financial, statistical and narrative reports.
- Create and implement a community mobilization plan that encourages resident involvement in activities designed to change local norms towards gun violence. This includes the creation of an anti-violence coalition or participation in a pre-existing coalition.
- Define project or initiative scope, goals and deliverables that support business goals in collaboration with senior leadership and stakeholders
- Develop full-scale project plans and associated communications documents.
- Communicates project expectations to team members and stakeholders
- Public Knowledge exchange re: violence prevention, public health, and trauma informed care informed practice
- Create the vision and strategic plan for the program
- Procure funds from foundations, corporations, government agencies, and individual donors

**U.I.C. – Ceasefire**  
**February 2015 – July 2017**  
Senior Program Manager / National Trainer

**Chicago, IL**

- Manage programs that require contact with internal and/or external clients. Hire, train, and supervise staff.
- Prepares funding grants along with financial, statistical and narrative reports.

- Opened violence prevention sites throughout the U.S., trained staff, and provided technical assistance
- Asses, evaluate, and make corrections to programs to ensure desired outcomes are met.
- Generates metrics to measure team and project impact and hold the team accountable for success.
- Develops full-scale project plans and associated communications documents.
- Participate in all Ceasefire administration/management meetings and ensure that meeting proceedings are communicated to Ceasefire staff and supervisor(s);
- Fulfill speaking engagements and media events on behalf of Ceasefire.; Interface with current and potential funders and supporters;
- Coordinate all fiscal, reporting, and human resources matters with other Center for Court Innovation staff as needed;
- Collaborate with and maintain regular contact with local and Chicago-based technical assistance providers;
- Work with the program evaluator to effectively track, manage, and analyze all program data;

### **UCAN Academy**

**Chicago, IL**

**December 2012 – February 2015**

Behavior Intervention Specialist/Facilitator for Staff Training

- Facilitate training of employees
- Manage students using therapeutic crisis intervention techniques to de-escalate conflicts;
- Work with troubled youth to provide recommendations for youths to address violence in the home and school
- Review and maintain student organization files
- Implement pathways to achieving goals

### **Riveredge Hospital**

**Forest Park, IL**

**May 2014 – February 2015**

Mental Health Counselor

- Assist in the direct care and management of patients as prescribed by the physician and therapist,
- Provide age specific supervision appropriate to the developmental level and specific treatment needs of the individual patient
- Process patient admission, chart behaviors, provide for safety and crisis management for the patient population
- Provide training, guidance, and leadership to mental health associates; identify areas of improvement within the program and make recommendations in collaboration with the Nurse Manager.

### **U.I.C. – Ceasefire**

**Chicago, IL**

**February 2012 – July 2012**

Violence Interrupter

- Identify, build and develop community relationships

- Work in high risk areas to promote peace in the community
- Mediate conflicts with diverse youths, individuals and/or groups
- Present at various schools and community events promoting peace
- Provide guidance to high risk individuals daily within the inner city

**Illinois Air National Guard**  
**July 1989 – 1992**

**HONORS & AWARDS**

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2021	University of Illinois at Chicago Magna Cum Laude
2021	University of Illinois at Chicago Magna Cum Laude
2018	Congressional Veterans Brain Trust Award
2017	Ford Motors Man of Courage
2016	University of Illinois at Chicago CLJ Practitioner of the Year
2014	Northeastern Illinois Merit Award Scholar
2013	Northeastern Illinois Summa Cum Laude

**SELECT RECENT MEDIA APPEARANCES**

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Morgan Freeman’s Discovery TV Series Through the Wormhole (June 2016)  
 The Morning Shift radio show (May 2016). *WBEZ*, [featured guest]  
 Chicago Tribune Interview (21 May 2016)

Crime Watch Daily (featured) (25 January 2016)

Black Lives Matter group is pressured to expand the scope of its outrage. (12 December 2015)  
 The Washington Post.

Finding the solution to gun violence: Stopping the Spread of Murder (11 November 2015) People Magazine.

Chicago fights for anti-violence program as shootings rise. (20 October 2015),  
<http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/live-news/2015/10/chicago-fights-for-anti-violence-program-as-shootings-rise.html>