

# Supporting the successful reintegration of serious juvenile offenders under community supervision by assisting desistance processes

Marie-Pierre Villeneuve, Ph.D.

Département de psychoéducation



5th World Congress on Probation and Parole  
Ottawa, ON  
September 30, 2022



# Context

- **Recidivism rates** are high and **failure** is a common experience in the juvenile justice system, especially for serious and persistent offenders (Brame et al. 2016; Piquero et al., 2012).
- Concerns arise regarding their ability to **fulfill their adult roles** (Brame et al., 2016).
- Repeated contacts with the criminal justice system may interfere with identity formation and the capacity to change through **labelling processes** (McAra & McVie, 2010).
- Significant amount of evidence on how and why adolescents engage in crime and risk factors for recidivism.
- **Much less is known** about how youth in conflict with the law come to terms with criminal activity or, in other words, **desist from crime** (Lipsey, 2009; McMahon & Jump, 2018; Stout et al., 2017; Thornberry et al., 2012).
- Desistance is part of the **journey towards social (re)integration**
  - A better understanding of this process is essential to develop more humane and effective practices.

## Desistance from serious/persistent offending during adolescence: Evidence from a scoping review

- **Willingness to change** often leads to cessation of offending
  - Intrinsic: criminal justice system fatigue, searching for a better life
  - Extrinsic: disruption in their normal routine (e.g. arrest, new friendship)
- **Envisioning a positive future** sustains cessation and supports cognitive and identity shifts.
- Identity shifts require dealing with – and accepting – **losses**
  - Period of doubts, fears and temptations
  - Importance of self-confidence, having goals and (re)taking control of their lives
- Which begs to question: **who can help** them navigate these shifts and **how can we help them** through this process?

## Desistance from serious/persistent juvenile offending: Evidence from a scoping review

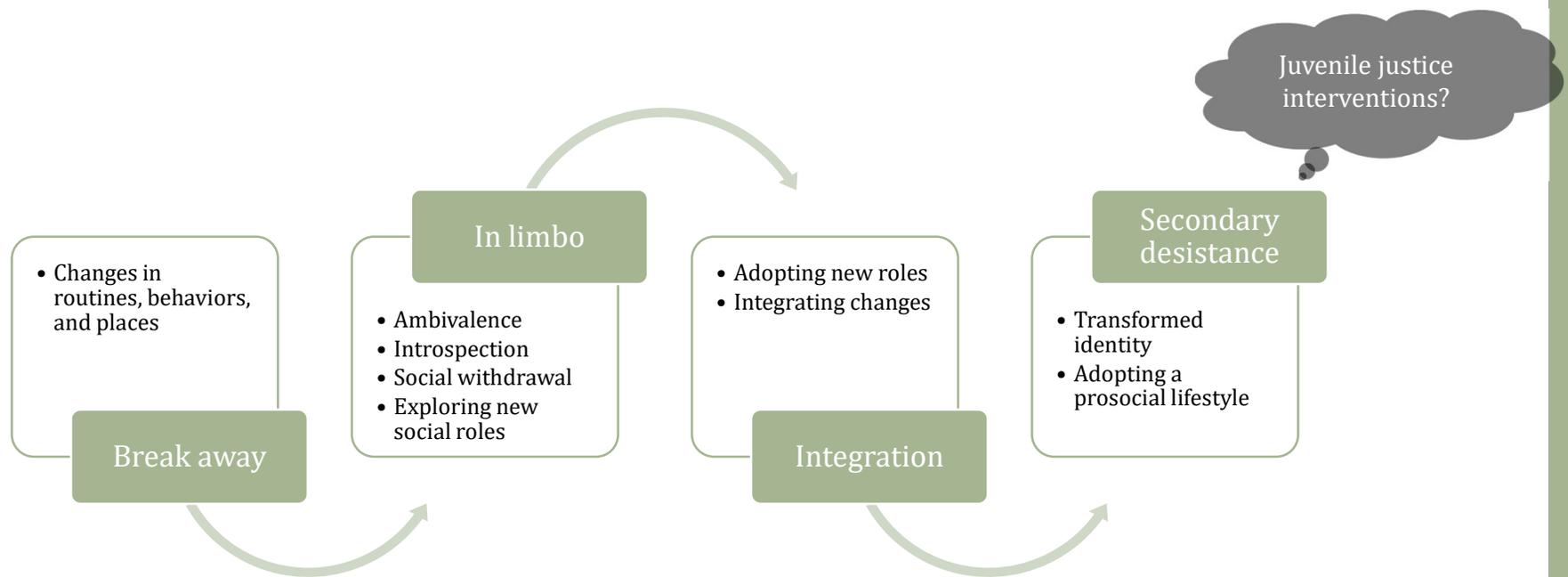
- Evidence suggests personal dispositions can help navigate the move away from delinquency toward a prosocial lifestyle
  - Being **extroverted**\*
    - *How they interact with others is important to consider*
  - Refraining from the use of **psychoactive substances**
- **Social support** appears to play a crucial role in the process
  - Quality vs quantity
  - **Parental support**\*
  - (New) prosocial **friends**
  - Romantic **relationship** with a prosocial partner
  - Stable employment\*
  - **Actors** of the criminal justice system

# Sanctions, recidivism and desistance

- The nature of the sentence and of the supervision practices can inhibit change efforts



# Conceptual framework



Adapted from Healy (2012)

## Objectives and methods

- Explore how adolescents in conflict with the law make the **transition** from primary to secondary desistance while under an intermediate sanction
  - What are the individual, relational and structural factors assisting or hindering the transition toward secondary?
    - Cessation of offending
    - Adoption of prosocial roles
    - Identity changes
- Qualitative analysis
  - Case files of 26 adolescents under a suspended sentence (DCSO)
  - 15-80 pages of material for each case
  - General inductive approach (Thomas, 2006)

# Participants

- 26 males
- Between 15,5 and 19 years old at the beginning of the sentence
  - Mean age: 17 years
- Length of DCSO: between 3-6 months
- Types of offenses:
  - Against person ( $n = 11$ )
  - Drugs ( $n = 9$ )
  - Property ( $n = 4$ )
  - Other ( $n = 2$ )
- Most have a criminal record (23/26)
- Most were on parole before the DCSO (15/26)
- Co-occurring problems:
  - Substance abuse (8/26)
  - Mental health disorders (7/26)

# Participants

	At the beginning of the DCSO	At the end of the DCSO	12 months after the beginning of the DCSO
<b>Work</b>	<b>6</b>	9 (+3)	13 (+4)
School	6	6 (+0)	5 (-1)
School-Work	3	4 (+1)	2 (-2)
Searching for a job	5	6 (+1)	6 (+0)
<b>Leisure-friends</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1 (-5)</b>	<b>0 (+0)</b>

## Imposed changes to prevent recidivism

- Changes can start to take place **before** the sanction is imposed:
  - + : Some cease to use psychoactive substances and modify their daily activities, « *because they always have to be with one of their parents* » (Pierre-Olivier).
  - - : Others « *spend time with their friends* » (Alexandre et Charles-Olivier), « *playing video games* » (Antoine et Pascal) or they « *wait for the inscription period for school* » (Kevin et Jacob).
- The **first appointments** with the youth delegate mainly focus on the conditions of the order and monitoring their behaviors.
  - Curfew
  - How they employ their time (agendas, paystubs, job searches, proof of inscription)
  - Prescribing tasks

## Imposed changes to prevent recidivism

- **Prescribing** tasks and **reminding** supervisees of their obligations is **not enough** to put them into action.
  - Several youth delegates note adolescents' **lack of organization and structure**, which can be exacerbated by the presence of a mental health disorder.

*« Looking at his past week. He says he had a **lot of appointments**: went to alternative justice organisation to plan his community work, **missed** an appointment with his public defender and must go back, went to the dentist. **Forgot** to call the rehab center to set an appointment to assess his use of psychoactive substances. **Did not call** for school transportation [...] Presently, he is rather **inactive** (Jacob).*

## Changes that weigh heavily

- The **weight of the order** is heavy for many adolescents:
  - They « *find it difficult to have so many appointments* » (Antoine).
  - They « *claim they only go to work or to school, and see their girlfriend. They ask for a little more 'room to breathe' to be able to see their friends* » (Raphaël).
  - Others « *appear to be discouraged by their job search* » (Alexandre).
- Some choose to **modulate their participation** in certain activities – or are at least tempted to do so:
  - Pierre-Olivier « *plans to stop going to school because he says he has too much on his plate right now and claims he does not know where to turn* ».
- Many of them have **limited options** to comply with the conditions related to the way they occupy their time.

## Limited possibilities

- Going to school is not an option for many adolescents under a DCSO ( $n = 15$ ).
- Past experiences have a negative impact on their interest in pursuing their education or on the programs they have access to.

*« The mother informs me that Mathieu was not accepted into adult education, probably because he does not have his secondary 2 yet in all school subjects. He is in secondary 1 in French. He has been for the past two years. He was caught in his own game when he learned during an information session yesterday that he couldn't go into the construction program because he didn't have the prerequisites. »*

- Financial issues can also limit the interest in further pursuing education/professional training
  - Lure of profits
  - Financial responsibilities
- Possibilities of improving one's lot are also limited.

## Limited possibilities

- Others were already going to school ( $n = 11$ )
  - In Quebec, attending school is mandatory for youths aged 16 and under
  - Many were enrolled in vocational training
- But the interest in that project slowly dissipates with time ( $n = 5$ )

*« The father received a call from someone at school, saying Hugo must go to all of his classes. If not, he will be expelled. Reasons: unjustified absences and not respecting his enrollment contract. Hugo admits he did not go to all of his classes. He failed his physical sciences class. He has to retake it and the classes take place at night. He associates his current situation to his laziness. He is cooperative, but becomes increasingly impatient during our appointment. His tone changes. I talk to him about the fact that he is letting himself go, about his lack of involvement. Hugo becomes uncooperative. He says he knows what he has to do, that he will do it but nothing more. Does not want to go further in his engagements. »*

## Conformity of real changes?

- Most adolescents do not have a clear vocational project:

*« We enter the heart of the matter. He must put himself into action, because there is a risk of recidivism if he does not do something. He says it is not true. He says he does not have a clear plan for his life, he waits to see what life will bring him. »  
(Guillaume).*

*« He says he must have money for when he will turn 18. He does not want to be caught off guard. He does not really know what he wants to do, but does not wish to work in construction for the rest of his life. » (Maxime)*

- A lot of them « pull at the elastic » :

*« He did not enroll in school but he should go to adult school. At the moment, he just wants to finish high school and work. He is currently inactive and does nothing with his time. We offer to help him engage in a serious path [...] He thinks about going to school during the day and working at night. [...] If he is inactive during the day, we will take charge of his time. » (Thomas)*

# Limited sources of informal social support

- Hints of family dysfunction were found in most files:
  - Conflicts between family members
  - Separated/Divorced parents
  - Socioeconomic difficulties
  - Lack of emotional availability
- Peer networks are often made up of youths they can no longer be associated with:
  - « *His friends don't want to go to his house anymore, because they can not take drugs there* » (Patrick)
  - « *He says he stays at home and does not see his friends to avoid getting in trouble* » (Jacob)
  - « *He says he cannot see his old accomplices because of the conditions of his sentence.* » (Alexandre)

## Formal support

- In some cases, it can be difficult for the adolescent to comply with all the conditions of his sentence and the supervision modalities.
- Adjustments are possible to alleviate such difficulties, for instance :
  - « *Giving bus tickets* » (Thomas)
  - « *Setting appointment closer to the adolescent's home because gas is expensive* » (Jacob)
  - « *Temporarily suspend phone calls to verify his compliance with curfew. Because of the medication he takes following his accident, he does not wake up when we call.* » (Mathieu)
- The « gradation of intervention » allows for the use of various measures by youth delegates to elicit a change in the adolescent's mobilization:
  - « *First, we talk about how it is going since his return home, what he thought of the suspension of his order and his 48h in detention, what he makes of it. He is open to discuss it. He says he realizes that is what he needed and that he will do everything he has to from now on.* » (Charles-Olivier)

## Formal support

- Whereas some have parental support when it comes to finding a job, other are accompanied by youth delegates and/or community organizations.

*« Kevin asks information about the employability program. He would like to participate before school starts. I take the necessary actions so he can have a traineeship. [...] I meet Kevin where he does his traineeship, he is in a good mood. He is really happy to have the opportunity for this paid traineeship. »*

*« I ask him how his group therapy for impulsive behaviors went. Adam tells me 'everything went really well'. He thinks it will help him get rid of his 'important emotional baggage' and find what contributes to his impulsivity. »*

# Discussion

- Even in the **most precarious situations**, formal interventions can be a lever for desistance, insofar as:
  - They are adapted to the individual and social circumstances of the adolescent.
  - They allow for positive experiences.
  - The youth delegates mobilize their role of control agent to support that of rehabilitation agent.
  - They support the adolescent in the development of personal resources.
- Even in the **most favorable situations**, formal interventions can act as a barrier to desistance, as:
  - They add to the adolescent's s already busy schedule.
  - They mobilize the role of control agent, rather than that of rehabilitation agent.
  - Access to programs to support rehabilitation is limited.

## Discussion

- **Tertiary desistance** (defined as community integration) can **precede** or facilitate secondary desistance.
- In some cases, adolescents' must be offered opportunities/alternatives to instill hope and incite them to make efforts to change – **before changes** can actually start to take place.
- Aiming for community integration of judicialized youth requires to change the way we conceive supervision:
  - It must consist in **giving tools** (work experiences, training, developing job skills, emotion management skills, problem solving) if we want to support long-term desistance and, in case of a (re)lapse, facilitate the next attempt at desistance.

# Thank you!

- To know more about our work:
  - [Marie-pierre.villeneuve@usherbrooke.ca](mailto:Marie-pierre.villeneuve@usherbrooke.ca)
- Villeneuve, M.-P., F.-Dufour, I. & Turcotte, D. (2019). The transition towards desistance from crime among serious juvenile offenders: A scoping review. *Australian Social Work*, 72(4), 473-489.