# Predicting Criminality? Risk Factors, Neighbourhood Influence and Desistance

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## Abstract

Using qualitative biographical data from a longitudinal study of youth transitions, criminal careers and desistance, this paper casts doubt on the veracity and predictive power of risk assessment devices such as Asset and OASys. These devices, and the research on which they are based, suggest that earlier and current childhood and teenage influences trigger and sustain later re-offending. In contrast, we argue that focus must be shifted to contingent risk factors that accrue in late teenage and young adulthood. Secondly, risk assessment and criminal career research has ignored the influence that unforeseen and unforeseeable processes of neighbourhood destabilization and life events have in criminal careers and their cessation.

**Keywords:** careers, criminality, desistance, prediction, risk

## Introduction: Risk and Prediction

Many of those who work with offenders use risk assessment devices that purport to measure the likelihood of an individual re-offending and being reconvicted. Using the presence of past and current risk factors that individual offenders accrue and present, it is claimed that these devices offer a reliable and valid tool to predict future offending. Two similar types of risk assessment devices have been rolled out nationally to the youth and adult justice systems. The National Probation Service and Prison Service use the *Offender Assessment System* (OASys) and the Youth Justice Board and Youth Offending Teams use *Asset*. The *OASys User Manual* claims that 'The assessment of risk posed by an offender, and the identification of the factors which have contributed to the offending, are the starting points for all work with offenders' (Home Office, 2002: 1). The *Asset* 'assessment framework for young people' aims to 'identify a multitude of factors or circumstances – ranging from lack of educational attainment to mental health problems – which may have contributed to [offending] behaviour' (Youth Justice Board, 2003: 1). Both devices use prediction scores based on criminal history and other

factors as a means of predicting, managing and intervening in individual offending behaviour. The evidence base for their design comes from long-standing studies of aggregated risk factors commonly found in offender populations. A recent evaluation of the predictive reliability and validity of Asset found them to be high although there was some concern about standardization and consistency of use by youth justice practitioners (Baker et al., 2003).

There has been not only an academic resurgence of interest in risk and criminal career (see Smith and McVie, 2003; Smith and McAra, 2004; Smith, 2004a, 2004b; McAra, 2004; Webster et al., 2004; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Farrington, 2002b) but also the emergence of national offender management systems predicated on the veracity of risk assessment that measures the 'risk' individuals are said to pose in terms of their future offending behaviour, and 'risk' factors identified in childhood or early adolescence are targeted for intervention and the prevention of future criminality. It is in this context that we report some findings from three linked studies of the longer-term transitions of young people growing up in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in England.[1] Drawing from these studies in Teesside we focus here on young people and young adults identified in the studies as engaging in criminal and/or drug using careers. On the basis of this evidence we are sceptical that the risk assessment devices currently employed in the youth and criminal justice systems are either valid or reliable.

## The Teesside Studies: Our Approach

The Teesside studies used a close-up, qualitative, longitudinal approach in which we asked young people to recall their biographies back to childhood. We then re-interviewed them several years later to explore changes and continuities in their lives as they grew into young adulthood. Previous criminological studies of criminal careers have typically used larger-scale, longitudinal cohort data to measure risk factors that predispose individuals towards criminality (e.g. high impulsivity, low intelligence, poor parenting). It is thought that the identification of early risk factors allows the prediction of later delinquent and criminal behaviour and that risk factors are amenable to early intervention and prevention. By contrast, sociological studies have focused on blocked opportunities and that delinquency and criminality are one type of group 'solution' to lack of opportunity. Our Teesside studies of criminal and drug careers demonstrate how careers are shaped by interdependent, concurrent, multiple careers – not only those of crime and drug use. This combination and interaction of criminal with other concurrent employment, housing and family careers has been mostly ignored in previous criminological and sociological studies of criminal careers.

Our biographical focus allows exploration of how individual risk factors (e.g. family circumstances) interact, at different stages, with the structured opportunities facing young people (e.g. the possibilities presented by local criminal and drug markets). We sought to understand both the active role and limited choices of young people and the particular historical, cultural and socio-economic conditions of neighbourhoods in the making of criminal careers (Johnston et al., 2000; Webster et al, 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 172) 'uncovered many instances of individuals who did not pursue full-blown criminal and/or drug-using careers, but who

might have been predicted to do so (given the risk factors that could have been ticked off against them)'. This finding is consistent with those of all three studies conducted at different times with individuals living in the same places. Even when they had begun, criminal careers did not always follow a steady course. Unpredictable critical moments and life events sometimes turned people away from criminal careers, sometimes towards them (Webster et al., 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005).

## Methods

We interviewed 185 young people aged 16–25 in 1999 and 2000. Of these, 168 interviewees provided accounts that were deemed reliable enough for purposes of analysing risk factors by criminal and non-criminal outcomes. One hundred reported no criminal involvement ever, 21 reported one-off or short-lived offending (typically shop-lifting), and 47 reported recurrent offending (all of whom had received convictions and 33 of whom had been imprisoned). At the time of the interviews in 1999 and 2000 some recurrent offenders were also dependent opiate users as were others in the sample (n. 26). Given important caveats that the samples are small and this was not designed as a quantitative study, we here briefly provide an *approximation* of the influence of some typical 'risk factors' comparing recurrent offenders with those in the sample who had never offended (excluding the 21 'one-offs'). The last stage of our methodology involved re-contacting and interviewing a proportion of those who – at the time of our first interviews in 1999/2000 – were primarily engaged in: insecure 'poor work' (n. 11); parenting (young mothers) (n. 11); and long-term criminal and/or dependent drug-using careers (n.12). These 34 who were re-interviewed, were now aged 23 to 29 years, and it is the last of these three sub-samples that we consider in this paper.

## Some Rough Approximations of the Influence of Risk Factors

There was very little relationship between family types (e.g. being brought up in a single parent household) and whether an individual had frequently offended or never offended, used drugs or never used drugs. Being brought up in a single parent household was common among the whole sample, offenders and non-offenders. Although most frequent offenders could be said to have experienced typical risk factors, especially early and frequent truancy, over half of those who had never offended could also be said to have experienced typical risk factors, if being brought up in a single parent household is included as a risk factor. Thus among the never offended a quarter had frequently truanted, a fifth had no qualifications at all aged 16, and a third had a significantly troubled or traumatic life (including acrimonious parental divorce, domestic violence, parental institutionalization in prison or mental hospital, family estrangement from sibling, brought up in care). This perhaps surprising prevalence of risk factors among those who had never offended seemed to us to be a feature of living in some of the poorest places in Britain.

## Risk Factors: Looking Forward Rather than Backward

Numerous studies have concluded that the emergence and continuation of criminality in the lives of some individuals are a result of *earlier* life experiences. Studies have

pointed to the influence of factors such as truanting, family conflict and parenting on the later development of children, including the emergence of criminal behaviour in adolescence and its persistence into early and later adulthood (Loeber and Stouthhamer-Loeber, 1986; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Farrington and West, 1993; Samson and Laub, 1993; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Graham and Utting, 1996; Graham, 1988; Farrington, 1993, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2002a; Piquero et al., 2003). Some studies have claimed that deficiencies of upbringing and a combination of risk factors brought by such deficiencies predict and specify the subsequent course of criminal careers and types of offending (see Laub and Sampson's 2003 review). The influential Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (Farrington, 1996, 2000) found that the early onset of offending (aged 10 to 13) tended to be preceded by an earlier 'larger syndrome of anti-social behaviour' and to presage a protracted criminal career (aged 13 and 15) leading to eventual desistance (aged 21 and 25). Strikingly, the study suggested that a large proportion of those with chronic offending 'might have been identified with reasonable accuracy at age 10' (Farrington, 1994: 566). Risk factors that predispose individuals towards a criminal career (e.g. hyperactivity and high impulsivity, low intelligence and school failure, poor parenting) join with peer, school and community influences, and socio-economic deprivation (narrowly understood as low family income and poor housing), to propel individuals into a criminal career. Nevertheless, Farrington argues that risk factors are modifiable and are amenable to early intervention and prevention (Farrington, 2000, 2002b).

There are a number of problems identified by critics of this approach. Pitts (2001b) for example asks whether risk factors are symptoms or causes of offending behaviour, what causal primacy should be given to different factors and how we might understand their interrelationship, but that the answers to these questions remain unresolved. Typical of studies in this area is Graham and Bowling's (1995: 49) argument that a low level of parental supervision and truancy from school were the two strongest correlates of starting to offend, and that 'a low level of parental supervision was found to be strongly related to getting on badly with one or both parents, which in turn was found to be more likely in single parent and step families.' However, the causal relationships between parental supervision, truancy and offending are unclear because truancy may be both a cause and a consequence of offending. Also disengagement from school needs to be explained, and not simply causally related to offending.

An example from our data will suffice to clarify this problem. If we were to summarize or capture any single factor that seemed to most differentiate those who were frequent offenders from those who had never offended it was an early proclivity on the part of frequent offenders to 'hang around' street corners during the day with other truants. An older interviewee described this general experience of truancy as '[we] used to just pin ball about the estates, go walkabout all day' (quoted in MacDonald and Marsh, 2005: 72). Truancy itself seemed less important than how 'truancy time' was spent and with whom. Only a proportion of even frequent truants used truancy time to initiate delinquent activities. The often-cited strong association between lack of parental supervision, truancy and criminal offending cited above (Graham and Bowling, 1995) still needs to explain why a quarter of our never offended sample frequently truanted and that the majority of frequent truants came from intact families.

Our interviews also contained numerous instances of individuals pursuing conventional school-to-work careers after lengthy periods of school disaffection and absence. What did seem important was when 'hanging around' the estates was maintained as a dominant form of leisure throughout the teenage years and into early adulthood (McDonald and Marsh, 2005). Continued involvement with street corner society, and an associated particular form of masculine identity, was a process, for some, that saw the emergence of a group forum that initiated sustained criminal careers (Collison, 1996). MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 79) summarize:

> *The shift from relatively widespread, occasional wrongdoing (typified by instances of shoplifting) to less common, more purposeful, acquisitive and other crimes was associated with* persistent *physical absence from school and* continued *commitment to street-based peer groups.*

Virtually all those with more committed criminal careers had been frequent truants who had persisted in their 'loyal' attachments to earlier highly localized, estate-based, street youth culture. These social networks became progressively more detached from non-criminal engagement, and self-sustaining as criminal careers unfolded. In teenage years, local social networks were important in accompanying, supporting and encouraging criminal and/or drug-using identities, offered protection and criminal opportunity, kept the momentum and excitement of lawlessness and drug use going, as well as alleviating boredom, providing skills and contacts and crucially offered a means of entering illicit local markets in drugs and stolen goods. Later on they were to become the main impediment to desisting from criminality and dependent drug use.

As this discussion attempts to show, it is not parental supervision or frequent truancy as such that is the issue here. It is rather the nature and quality of the social relationships formed during truancy, and crucially, whether certain criminogenic forms of these relationships are continued or sustained into later teenage and young adulthood. There is no necessary relationship between truancy, the formation of criminal career and poor parental supervision (which arguably becomes less important as individuals grow older and locally based peer groups take precedence).

Because the Teesside studies were longitudinal in two senses – retrospective because interviewees were asked to recount their biographies, prospective because they were re-contacted several years after we first interviewed them to identify changes and continuities as they grew into young adulthood – we were able to look both backward and forward in their lives. In focusing on youth transitions into young adulthood we were more able to see whether the nature of risk factors identified in criminal career research change as individuals get older. We argue that this forward-looking approach can better take account of change, continuity and contingency in risk factors. Experiences occur in late teenage and young adulthood that can trigger or sustain criminal career, or lead to desistance, in ways that could not have been foreseen or predicted (see Laub and Sampson, 2003).

## Neighbourhood Influences: The Importance of Social Capital and Socio-economic Context

The Teesside studies were initiated precisely in response to earlier debates about whether an 'underclass' was emerging in poor neighbourhoods (see MacDonald and

Marsh, 2005, for a discussion). This debate posed dichotomous explanations of crime and place. Underclass theorists focused on the alleged place specific cultural generation of deficient individual or parenting factors most closely associated with the onset of youth offending *within* areas. Critics of this approach emphasized lack of opportunity due to social, economic and demographic factors that initially afflict neighbourhoods from *without* causing multiple deprivation (Pitts, 2001a). This debate is mirrored in the assumptions and design of risk assessment devices, which mostly ignore neighbourhood context and change.[2] Such devices primarily serve to individualize risk factors, presumably because these individualized factors are more amenable to early micro interventions than the more intractable influences of social exclusion and neighbourhood destabilization resulting from social and economic change. It is for this reason that some critics have argued that the narrowing down of risk factors to the family, parenting, truancy and peer groups, reflects more a process of political expediency and scientific attrition than any genuine attempt to understand the causes of criminality (Pitts, 2001b; Muncie, 2002, 2004).

Risk and prediction studies are criticized because they tend to ignore the role of neighbourhood influence and context in the emergence of risk factors associated with criminal careers (Sampson et al., 1997; Hope, 2001; Jones and Nellis, 1998; Jones et al., 2001; Pitts, 2001a). Numerous neighbourhood based studies have consistently shown that regardless of whether children and young people have accrued individual risk factors associated with chronic offending, serious offending is significantly more likely in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Conversely, predictions of offending based on risk fail to materialize in the case of individuals living in more affluent neighbourhoods (Lizotte et al, 1994; Thornberry et al, 1994; Wikstrom and Loeber, 1997; Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Lupton, 2003). The influence of neighbourhood, however, is not uniform. In disadvantaged neighbourhoods with high levels of mutual trust among neighbours and a willingness to intervene to supervise children and maintain public order, crime and victimization is much lower than in neighbourhoods experiencing high levels of concentrated poverty, weak residential stability and high transience (Sampson et al., 1997).

The Teesside findings present a somewhat different and more complicated picture. Virtually all our interviewees had lived in the area their whole lives. Despite having accrued the risk factors associated with offending, many of our sample did not go on to offend. Was this because the areas where they lived are characterized by high levels of mutual trust and possess the kinds of mutually supportive social networks (social capital) that supposedly deter offending?

We have already argued that sustained engagement in street-based social networks is a key aspect in understanding the criminal careers of some of our informants. By examining social networks we can also begin to discuss the sort of 'social capital' to which our informants had access. By this we mean the advantages and disadvantages that can come from longer-term commitment to the social networks in which people operated (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1994; Putnam, 2000; Forrest and Kearns, 2000; Field, 2003). Our study lends itself, however, to an interpretation of the effects of social capital as highly limiting of alternative opportunities, or in the case of criminal and/or dependent drug use, potentially destructive (Perri 6, 1997). The

research literature draws a distinction between 'bonding social capital' and 'bridging social capital'. 'Bonding social capital' refers to the strength of connections between individuals and their families and closest friends. 'Bridging social capital' refers to associations with people *beyond* one's immediate circle of family and friends. It was certainly the case that strong bonds across our informants' social networks helped in coping with life in poor communities. But social networks can also be restricting. Some of our evidence suggested that the trust and loyalties engendered through such ties could result in alternative opportunities being ignored.

Over the course of our study, from the earlier interviews in 1999 to our recent interviews in 2003, the majority of informants – both those who had offended and those who had not – had established very few new 'bridging ties' into networks beyond their close personal associations. Coping with the problems thrown up by their various careers and transitions meant, in fact, that their social networks had become smaller in scope, more focused on immediate family and friends and even more embedded in their immediate neighbourhoods. The geographic and social horizons of our interviewees, therefore, tended to be restricted to the place they were from. This process has important implications for longer-term possibilities in respect of education, training and employment opportunities. Our informants' lack of access to wider networks makes individual or collective social mobility unlikely. Seldom did their networks of family and friends provide the sort of social capital that might assist in transcending the limiting socio-economic conditions in which they lived. Indeed, they could be read as closing down opportunities (Strathdee, 2001). The best example of this can be found in the fact that such networks remained the key mechanism for job-search. Because those they used to help in finding jobs (i.e. extended family networks and friends) were also typically confined to the same sectors of the labour market as them, our interviewees remained tied to insecure, poor work that offered little chance of personal progression.

In respect of the social networks used by recurrent offenders and/or dependent drug users, these networks had become disrupted and diffused through processes of regular incarceration. More importantly, as individuals grew older and drug-criminal careers progressed, the earlier benefits that had accrued from social networks became liabilities. At our most recent interview with him, Micky was trying to desist from drug use with the support of his partner and her family. He talked about how dependent drug use led to increasing isolation as networks became restricted to other users only. He noted his struggle to escape from the people he had once considered friends:

> *When you're on the drugs, no cunt wants to know ya. All they can remember is all the bad things about ya. Like when you're on the heroin, obviously anything you do is bad, 'cos that's all you fucking think about. You just think about the habit. You don't think about the people around you . . . // . . . I haven't got none [best friends]. I'm trying to keep myself to myself 'cos, like, now you can find a best mate and he'll sit there and tell you he's clean and then two minutes later, it'll be 'haway, let's go get fuckin' some gear [heroin]' and I'm, like, 'I don't even wanna talk to you'.*

Previously chronic offenders and/or dependent drug users engaged in processes of desistance felt that this had only become possible because they had reduced or relinquished previous social networks, which they associated with their offending. Not

unlike others in the study who had never offended, social networks too had become smaller in scope and more centred on partners and family members. Rebuilding bonds was, however, a difficult process, and seemed conditional on individuals 'staying clean', which seemed non-negotiable. Amy had become closer to her mother and sister, largely due to her drug desistance:

> *They're [the family] really important now but I never realised when I was on the drugs 'cos you only think about your drugs. You don't think about nobody else ... // ... Well, I've fucking tortured my family. I've tortured my Mam and Dad while they're in the house, you know? Putting all the windows in and smashing the cars and pinching ... // ... nah, it's not summat you do.*

We return to the risks posed by dependent drug use and its association with chronic offending in the section on desistance below. Here we end this section noting the importance of the socio-economic context in which the availability of different kinds of social capital become available and change within neighbourhoods. In the next section we offer a more extended discussion in relation to the specific areas we studied. For us, although social capital – especially in its more restrictive and destructive forms – is important in shaping the destinies of neighbourhoods, we argue that neighbourhood influence and social capital are shaped over time and are transformed by the relationship of a neighbourhood with its economic environment. As change occurs – characteristically, deindustrialization in the areas we studied – forms of social capital that initially may have been an advantage in the getting of jobs and housing, subsequently become a disadvantage. What may once have been the 'right sort' of social capital becomes over a relatively short space of time, the 'wrong sort' of social capital. Social capital and social networks by their nature become cumulatively 'embedded', through interaction with family, friends and peers. This embedding of disadvantage is likely to be far more prevalent in neighbourhoods that become characterized by low socio-economic status (Hagan, 1993). Different neighbourhoods are differently placed to cope with urban, regional and national economic change. It is in this context that our understanding of the risks that generate crime and its persistence have evolved through an understanding of urban crime in relation to particular changing neighbourhood economies and the broader urban labour market (McGahey, 1986). As Smith and McVie (2003: 171) argue, in order to understand the complexity and context of how risk factors interrelate we need 'to integrate the study of individual differences and life histories with the study of the effects of communities and broader social context.'

## Different Sorts of Risks: Biography, Neighbourhood and History

The Teesside studies spoke to young people and young adults born between 1974 and 1983, most of whom had lived in the study area their whole lives, mostly in social housing. We believe their birth years and where they grew up are important factors in their subsequent biographical experiences. The mid-1970s to the early 1990s saw a sharp increase in regional poverty and multiple deprivation and large increases in the criminal victimization of residents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, especially those in Northern regions (Hope and Foster, 1992; Hope, 1994; Pitts and Hope, 1997; Webster, 2003; Webster et al., 2004). As the 1980s progressed the household income of council

house residents fell from three quarters to half of the national average, and by 1995, over half of council households had no breadwinner (Power and Tunstall, 1995; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Children and young people living in these areas were particularly badly affected. Young people not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) were concentrated in areas of substantial unemployment and deprivation. Young people's routes into NEET were often accompanied by early school disaffection, truancy, troubled early and later lives and negative experiences of being in care and the path from care to custody is well-trodden and well established (Bentley and Gurumurthy, 1999; Williamson, 1997; Coles et al., 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999; Stone et al., 2000; Britton et al., 2002).

What then was the context in which the young people we spoke to grew up? Between 1975 and 1986 one-quarter of all jobs and one-half of all manufacturing jobs were lost in Teesside and the area still suffers from high rates of unemployment and joblessness. Those aged 25 years at the time of our first interviews were born in 1974. In that year over half of Teesside's school-leavers gained jobs or apprenticeships. In 1999 – the time of our first interviews – only 6 per cent moved into work (Johnston et al., 2000). During the 1980s the areas we studied experienced a net loss of population due to the few who were able leaving, decline in marriage, more than a doubling of lone parent households, and a rapid decline in the proportion of the population involved in skilled and semi-skilled manual work (Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit, 1998; 1991 Census). Throughout this period and until very recently, these areas progressively suffered the highest rates of burglary, theft, car crime, vandalism and drug-related offending in Kelby (Kelby Borough Council, 1999).

Born on the cusp of a period of severe and rapid deindustrialization and economic restructuring, growing up in the depths of a sharp increase in regional poverty and multiple deprivation, subsequently finding themselves living in the poorest wards in the poorest town in Britain, saddled with a lowering of the youth wage and the reduction or withdrawal of previously enjoyed benefit entitlements – reduced or taken away, first from 16–17 year olds, later from 18–25 year olds – and meaningful labour market and training opportunities, interviewees faced a myriad of risks scarcely recognized in risk and prediction studies. The coincidences of the biographies of our cohort with local and rapid deindustrialization and all its subsequent destabilizing effects on their neighbourhoods was unforeseeable by those effected, and unpredicted by approaches that emphasize individual deficits while ignoring historical, social, economic and geographical context. Finally, to these structural risks we add unforeseen and unforeseeable contingent risks discussed in our next section.

## Fragile Desistance: Contingency and Critical Life Moments

In our studies, illicit drug use emerged as a crucial factor in shaping some of the most intractable experiences of persistent criminality. For the majority of all interviewees, drug-driven crime was *the* central fact that explained most of the problems of the areas we studied. We described above how *early* criminal careers often emerged in the context of persistent truancy and the purposelessness of disengaged peer groups. However, this did not always lead to more serious criminality related to the emergence of careers of

dependent drug use. It is to this 'drugs-crime nexus' (MacDonald and Marsh, 2002) that we now turn.

Our conclusions concur with numerous other studies that the causal and predictive relationship between drug use and criminality is complex, multifaceted, rarely uni-directional and sometimes not present. One can exist without the other. Nevertheless, the combination of criminal and drug-using careers found among some in our study points to the crucial role of changing drug markets and the appeal of 'poverty drugs' like heroin in driving serious criminality. Heroin entered Teesside in a substantial way in the mid-1990s at exactly the moment identified as the start of the 'second wave of heroin outbreaks' in Britain (Parker et al., 1998). Kelby has been identified as one of the worst areas affected by drug crime and Teesside is said to have proportionately more under-twenties starting drug treatment than anywhere else in the UK (Home Office, 2003; Johnston et al., 2000). This rapid transformation in the local drugs market reflected the primary features and conditions of the area as being ones of extreme social exclusion and that those undergoing such exclusion wish to 'blank out' their experiences. Goldberg (1999: 133) puts it well when he explains that problematic drug users attempt 'to escape – escape from the past, from the present, from society, from their feelings, from everything that passes through their heads, and from not having any future.' Again, we emphasize that there is no necessary relationship between heroin use, addiction and acquisitive crime. Economically marginal transitions can readily generate careers of crime, regardless of any contact with poverty drugs (Craine, 1997). Some interviewees displayed criminal careers but had only a fleeting acquaintance with illicit drug use while a few had more concerted illicit drug use but minimal offending. Nevertheless, many career criminals had a prolonged combination of both. Our main emphasis at this point however, is that the embedding of a cheap and accessible heroin market in Teesside in the mid-1990s was not foreseen and could not easily have been predicted. Its effects on the later biographies of most of our cohort, whether they developed drug dependent careers or not, was palpable.

As we stated earlier, criminal careers, once begun, did not always follow a steady course. Unpredictable 'critical moments' sometimes turned people away from criminal careers, sometimes towards them. The spur to desistance sometimes comes from particularly traumatic 'critical moments'. Our studies are replete with examples of such moments in individual's lives. For example, Lisa was 'in with a crowd getting into trouble and doing drugs' until she was raped by one of them. Zack explained how 'the turning point' in his life was when 'my best mate hung 'imself'. He had 'calmed down now', giving up 'all sorts of mad stuff' (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Micky regarded the deaths of his sister and friends in a road accident as responsible for his return to heroin addiction and crime. As a result of this return to crime and prison he had reluctantly finished with a long-standing partner. In the previous four years his family had abandoned him at certain times because of his heroin use. He committed to a new 'clean' partner and her family. Before his mother died of cancer, he promised her that he would never use heroin again. Promises to his mother and partner to 'stay clean' seemed defining moments in Micky's struggle to avoid chronic relapse (Webster et al., 2004).

By the time of his second interview aged 24, Danny was still unemployed, living outside the area with his partner, and having had a child, was about to marry. The

reasons he gave for having stopped using and offending were the birth of his daughter, childcare responsibilities, the discouragement of his partner, reconciliation with his family of origin, maturity, and effective drug counselling and treatment. Comparing his life in the most recent interview to when we first interviewed him, he said it was 'totally different'.

> *'Cos I was all over. I was never in one place before. I was always just . . . // . . . always like out in a car [usually stolen] and taking drugs and committing crime twenty-four hours a day. Where now I'm just in the house all the time, or going up [his partner's] Mam's and helping out and that.*

When we first spoke to him, Richard's offending seemed wholly heroin-driven. Yet since then he had gained a series of labouring jobs and placements on government schemes as a fitter, butcher and scaffolder. Like others, Richard cited the 'vicious circle' of heroin use, offending, prison, and then relapse into heroin use.

> *It's [heroin use and crime] like a vicious circle, I see it as. It's like one big magnetic, magnetic circle . . . // . . . and when you get out of jail it starts, you're slowly getting drawn back in all the time . . . slowly you end back on the circle again, moving round and round back in the same direction all the time.*

For those who had continued offending by the time of our most recent interviews, being a career criminal had reinforced the 'vicious circle' that worked against desistance. Jason explained that:

> *I've been in and out of prison for years and years and it gets to the point [where I think] 'I'm gonna stop this, I'm gonna go straight when I get out of here'. When you get out, you go straight back into the same area, same faces, all the drugs users. So it's a vicious circle. You get straight back into things.*

Harry's story illustrates how difficult desistance can become because having a criminal history impacts on other concurrent transitions, in respect of education, training and employment:

> *I started the job. I wasn't late once, I wasn't sick once . . . Erm, hadn't missed a shift . . . // . . . And basically, when they found out I did have a [criminal] record, he shot us out the door without even an explanation . . . // . . . I was more reliable than some of the people he had in there . . . // . . . So, that's what bugs me.*

Housing:

> *I went for a house, a couple of month back. I was in full-time employment, erm . . . I hadn't committed a criminal offence since 2000, since my release. So that was, like, three year without an offence . . . // . . . Basically, they said 'No, because of your list of offences'. I mean, I told them I had a criminal record. I volunteered all the information . . . // . . . They just kept turning me down for a house. It's basically, no one wants to give you a chance. That's what I've come across.*

And in respect of family transitions:

> *I mean, her [his partner's] Mam and Dad used to hate me. The first words I got out of her Mam's mouth were, when I seen her, were 'stay away from my daughter and my doorstep'. So, when we have a drink I always take the piss out of her with that . . . They're all right now.*

## Conclusion and Discussion

The factors that seemed to help desistance were not easily achieved or sustained and were contingent on particular biographical outcomes that could not easily have been predicted. Nevertheless, the establishment of stable partnerships, parenthood and employment in the lives of those with long-term criminal and dependent drug-using careers are critical factors in both motivating and sustaining desistance. For those with long-term heroin dependence, 'going straight' and 'getting clean' were long-term aspirations highly contingent on other factors (such as the availability of suitable drug treatment regimes and the disengagement from previous peer networks). Among those who continued offending, spending many years in and out of prison, on heroin and out of work, limited their opportunities to establish stable, loving partnerships – inhibited by their commitment to male friends, to drugs and to crime.

Much of what happened in the lives of our informants could not have been predicted from earlier experiences. The effects of critical life events varied in the ways individuals were able to cope. Living in poor communities heightens and concentrates risk while resources to cope with life events such as bereavement are diminished. The many instances of ill health and the death of a close relative (excluding grand parents) or sibling are unsurprising given local morbidity rates.

The advent of severe and rapid deindustrialization cumulatively and directly impacted on the lives of our sample as they were growing up. One far-reaching consequence was their experience of significant downward social mobility compared to the experiences of their parents. Their lives continued to be marked by economic marginality. Despite strong conventional aspirations to obtain decent work and training, at second interview in 2003 they remained either unemployed or intermittently employed at the bottom of local, casualized, low-waged labour markets. Paradoxically, those who at second interview were engaging with a fragile desistance from offending and dependent drug use, seemed to have travelled furthest, albeit from the potentially destructive trajectories encountered when we first spoke to them. For many, these trajectories were as much a product of the unforeseen embedding of a local heroin market as they were of other, earlier risk factors. Nevertheless, among recurrent offenders, desistance was a long drawn out process, dependent on biographical outcomes often contingent, and for individuals, unpredictable. Transitions from early teenage to young adulthood for most of our sample – whether individuals were engaged in criminality or not – were often fluid, non-linear, unpredictable and sometimes chaotic.

Criminal career research and its operationalization in risk assessment devices have not taken sufficient account of the role of accelerated social and economic change in engendering and concentrating risk factors in destabilized neighbourhoods among their inhabitants. Neither do they take account of unpredictable life events. In isolating individual risk factors from their context in biography, place and social structure, such devices offer ways of managing offenders rather than addressing the causes and cessation of individual offending.

## Notes

1   Our overall sample lived in seven wards in Kelby (anonymized place name), Teesside, all in the top 5 per cent most deprived wards in England, two of which were in the worst five – of 8,414 – in the country (DETR, 2000).
2   Asset, for example, in profiling an offender's likelihood of re-offending asks for a 'brief' description of the offender's neighbourhood and whether it is identified as a crime 'hotspot', presents obvious signs of drug dealing, and whether it has age-appropriate facilities, but this hardly addresses neighbourhood influence in any meaningful way.

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