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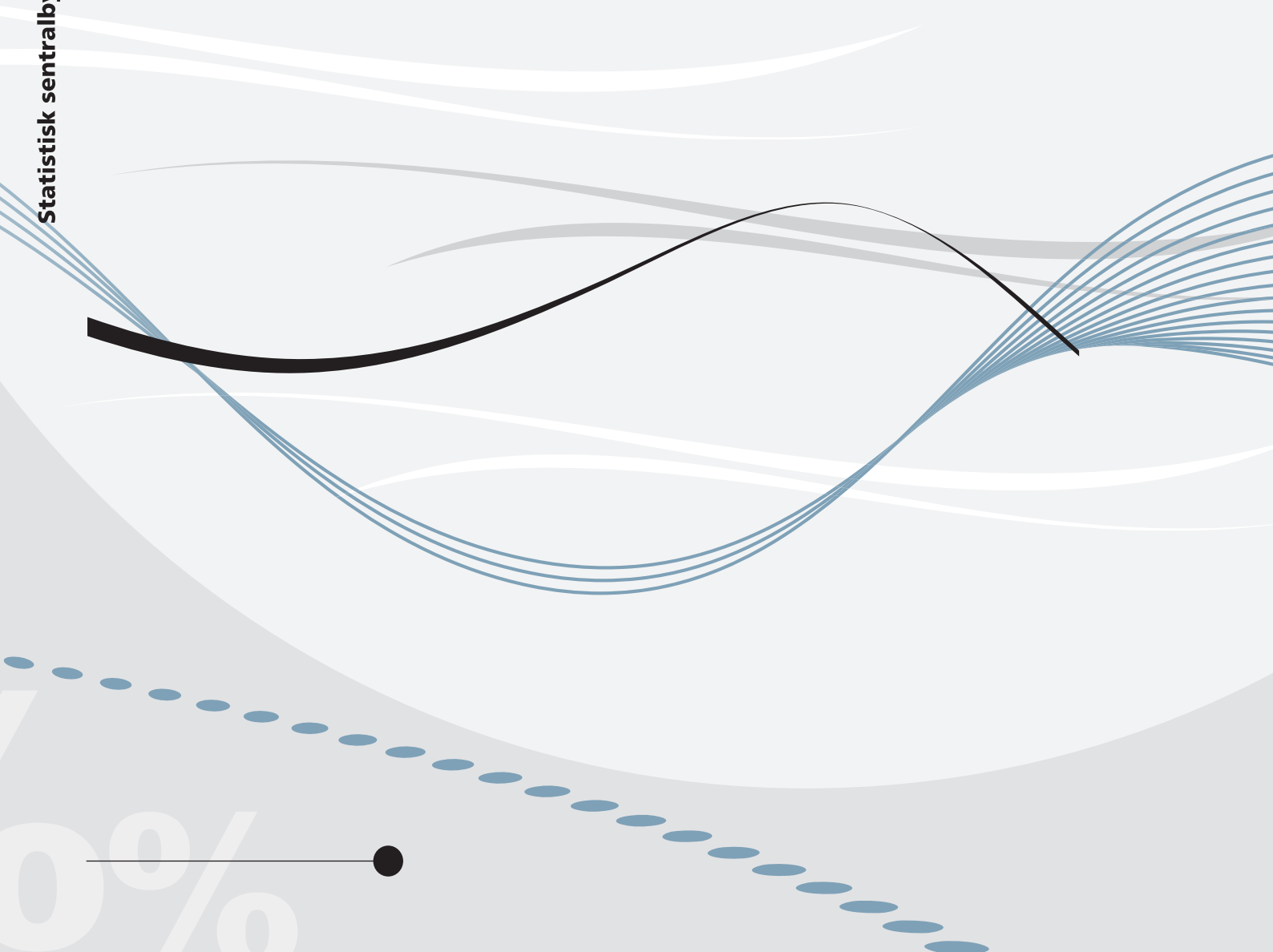
How much can be explained by life course transitions?



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How much can be explained by life course transitions?

Abstract:
Objectives: Previous studies have argued that marriage, parenthood and employment are important factors that lead to desistance from crime. However, the effects of these events only apply to those experiencing them and do not necessarily explain why the majority of desisters stop offending. In this research note, we discuss how large a proportion of desisters experience these transitions. Methods: We describe changes in the lives of those who have stopped offending. We use data from a total population sample of all registered male offenders in Norway who committed at least five crimes in the past five years, and none thereafter (N=4963 persons). We report relevant life events from five years before until five years after the last recorded crime. Results: Of those who terminated their criminal career, 10 percent got married, 22 percent had a child, and 31 percent increased the number of months they were employed. In total, 47 percent experienced at least one of these events. *Conclusion*s: While marriage, parenthood and employment are central to life course criminology, the majority of those who terminate a criminal career do so for other reasons.

Keywords: crime, desistance, family, employment, life-course

JEL classification: K00

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Sammendrag

En rekke studier har omhandlet i hvilken grad familiedanning, arbeid og andre hendelser i livsløpet kan forklare at personer med en kriminell karriere slutter med kriminalitet. Det har derimot vært lite belyst hvor mange av dem som slutter med kriminalitet som har opplevd en slik hendelse, og dette setter en øvre ramme for hvor mye som kan «forklares» på denne måten. Denne artikkelen beskriver et utvalg av menn med en kriminell bakgrunn som ikke får noen ny siktelse mot seg i løpet av en femårsperiode. I løpet av perioden fem år før siste lovbrudd til fem år etter siste lovbrudd, var det 10 prosent som ble gift, 22 prosent som ble foreldre, og 31 prosent som fikk en jobb. Totalt 47 prosent opplevde minst en av disse hendelsene. Dette innebærer at majoriteten av lovbryterne som sluttet med kriminalitet må ha gjort det av andre grunner enn dette.

Desistance from crime has taken center stage in life course criminology. One of the pivotal studies in this area is by Laub & Sampson (2003). They argued that certain life course transitions are important changes that "knife off" the past from the present, strengthen social bonds and change routine activities in fundamental ways. These transitions are often referred to as turning points in a criminal career. Although the changes might be gradual over time (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998), it is initiated by structural changes (Laub and Sampson 2003: 147). The empirical literature almost exclusively focused on employment and marriage, although the theoretical arguments are not limited to these events.

Other theoretical approaches put greater emphasis on agency, although agency is also a part of Laub and Sampson's (2003) argument. The theory of cognitive transformation (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002), suggest that a cognitive "readiness for change" is a precondition for offenders making use of opportunities to change their lives, such as marriage and work. Although each theoretical approach emphasizes gradual change the order of events differ (Skardhamar and Savolainen 2014). The theory of age-graded social control (Laub and Sampson 2003) suggest that it is the structural change that leads to this process of change while Giordano et al (2002) suggest that the change might precede the transition. Despite the theories being in part competing, both suggest a causal effect on crime, although of a different kind: the events might *initiate* change (Laub and Sampson 2003) or *sustain* an ongoing process (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

The empirical literature has shown empirical associations consistent with the hypothesis that life course transitions are related to desistance from crime. On average, offending is lower when one is employed or married than when that is not the case (see, e.g. Bersani, Laub, and Nieuwbeerta 2009; Bersani and van Schellen 2014; Blokland and Nieuwbeerta 2005; Savolainen 2009). Some studies have also focused on parenthood as a turning point, showing that parenthood is followed by a lowered level of offending (Kreager, Matsueda, and Erosheva 2010; Monsbakken, Lyngstad, and Skardhamar 2013; Savolainen 2009; Zoutewelle-Terovan et al. 2012). Although the theoretical arguments are not limited to employment and marriage, the empirical literature almost exclusively focuses on these events.

While there exists many studies on the effect of each transition (employment, marriage, parenthood), not many studies report how many of those who desist actually experienced these events. It should be recognized that an event can have a large effect although very few experience the event, so to answer why people desist from crime, one cannot only refer to the effect sizes. The effect of events such as

marriage can only apply to those who actually get married, so, if that proportion is small, marriage does not explain much of why people stop offending – even though the estimated effects might be large. To put it differently, if marriage, employment and parenthood are the important reasons why people stop offending, then a large proportion of those who desist should have married, become a parent or got a job around the time of their last recorded crime. However, some of those who experienced these events would have desisted anyway, so the proportion that got married, became a parent or got a job represents at the best *the maximum number* who desisted because of these events.

In this research note, we describe a sample of serious offenders in Norway who terminated their criminal careers between 2001 and 2004 (N=4963). By calculating the proportions that got married, became a parent, or got a job in the years around desistance, we arrive at an estimate - an *upper bound* - of how large share can be explain by these events.

Data and methods

We extract data from various Norwegian administrative registers operated by Statistics Norway, including information from the police records concerning all solved cases, as well as information from the population register and the employment register. Because each citizen has a unique personal identification number, it is possible to link individual-level information on, e.g., dates of changes in marital status (but not cohabitation), employment, childbirths, death, in- and out-migration, imprisonment, and offences across different registers (Lyngstad and Skardhamar 2011).

All studies of desistance face the problem of measuring the outcome variable. It is not at all clear how "desistance" should be defined (see, e.g.Laub and Sampson 2001). Desistance is considered a *gradual* process towards a more law-abiding lifestyle. In such case, "desistance" would simply imply a decrease in offending ending in becoming law-abiding at some point. This implies that the sample must be defined in terms of 1) a history of offending that constitutes something that can reasonably be denoted a "career", and 2) a crime-free period after the last offence. As the desistance process might have started before the last registered offence, but could also potentially happen after the last offence, we take into account life course transitions that occurred during a longer period *surrounding* the last registered offence.

To define our sample of men who terminated their criminal careers, we follow all men in Norway from 1992 to 2004 through the Norwegian crime statistics. In each year, we summarize the number of separate months with at least one recorded offence committed in the previous five years, and follow a

corresponding procedure for the subsequent five years (until 2009). We select a sample of men who had at least five such records during the previous five-year period. Termination of a criminal career is then defined as not having any offences in the subsequent five-year period. As we are concerned with adult transitions, we restrict the sample to those aged 18-60 years in the year of their last recorded offence. This yields a sample of N = 4963 "desisters" who committed their last crime between 2001 and 2004.

Taking the year of last recorded crime as the reference year, we give an overview of when the relevant events took place. Thus, we provide numbers for how large a proportion got married (and when), how many experienced at least one childbirth (and when), and how many experienced changes in employment (and when). We also include some outcomes that are not so commonly reported in previous studies, but are instead treated as censoring, namely death, emigration, and imprisonment.[1]

Results

Table 1 shows the proportion of those terminating their criminal career who got married, had at least one child, increased the number of months they were employed, spent at least one year in prison, emigrated permanently or died in the years before/after their last recorded offence. We also included the proportion of men who either got married, had a child or increased the number of months they were employed. Ten percent got married in the years before/after their last registered crime, 5 percent before and 5 percent after their last recorded crime. A rather large proportion (22 percent) became parents, equally distributed before and after their last registered crime. Thirty-one percent increased the number of months employed after desistance compared to their employment situation during the five years before their last recorded crime. While only a minority experienced each of these events, a larger proportion experienced at least one of them. Almost half the sample (47 percent) either got married, had a child or had some increase in employment in the years before/after their last registered crime. A total of 6 percent spent at least one year in prison, with a majority being imprisoned in the years after committing their last crime. As many as 21 percent of the sample died around the time of their last recorded crime, and 13 percent died in the same year they committed their last crime, whereas 8 percent died in the following five years. Thus, for this sample, death was more common than marriage, although note that an additional unknown proportion became cohabitants. Only 3

[1] Our data on imprisonment only cover the period 2001-2008. This means that more of our sample might have gone to prison *before* their last recorded offence. Thus, imprisonment could have had an impact on desistance, but our measure of desistance is not distorted by unobserved time in prison.

percent of the sample emigrated permanently – some in the same year as their last registered crime, but most within five years of their last crime.

Table 1: Proportion of men aged 18-60 years who experienced various events around the time of their last registered crime. Percent.

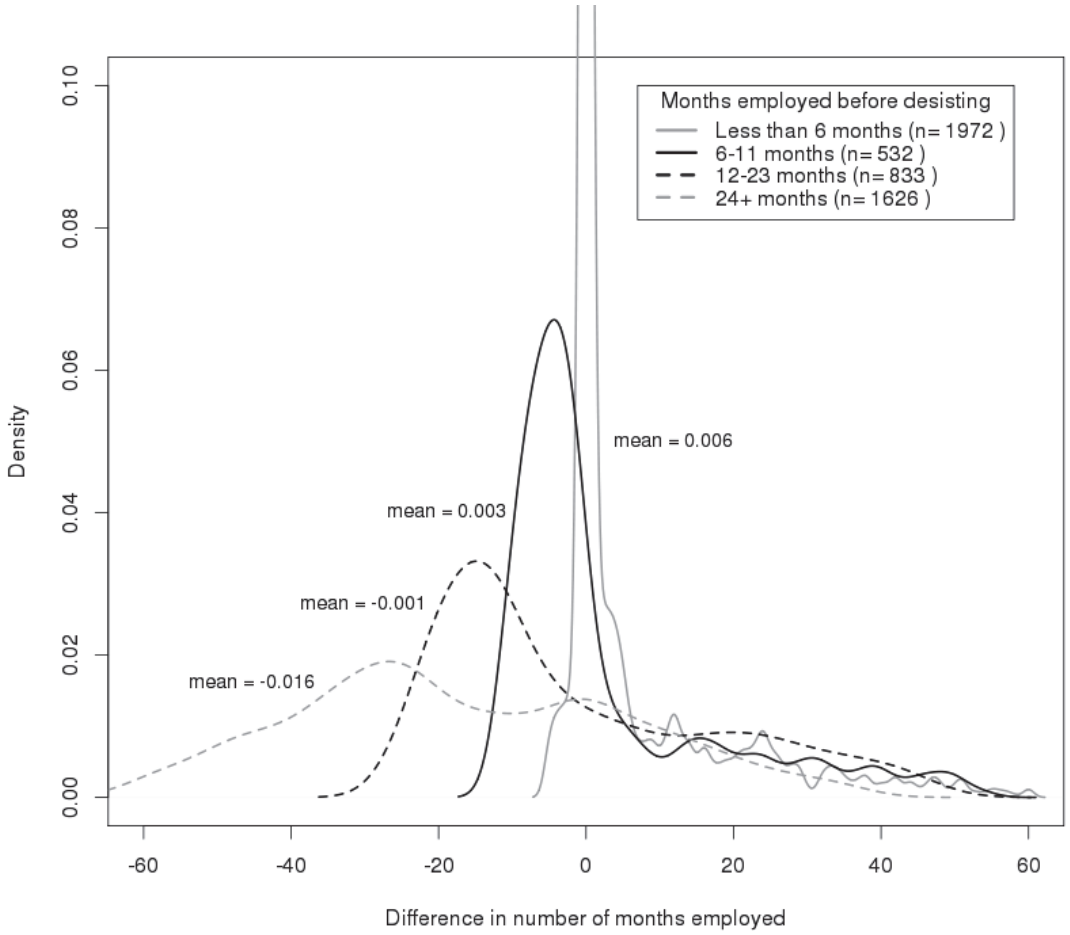
	Total	Within 5 years before last crime	Within 5 years after last crime
Got married	9.9	4.8	5.0
Had a child	22.3	11.0	11.3
Any increase in the number of months employed			31.4
Either got married, had a child or increased the number of months employed	47.4		
Imprisoned for more than one year	6.2	1.6	4.6
Died	20.6	12.5[a]	8.0
Emigrated	2.5	0.7[a]	1.8

[a] Including those who died/emigrated during the year the last registered crime was committed

As regards employment, Table 1 reports how many *increased* the number of months they were employed after their last offence compared to the five-year period before desistance, so an increase from zero to one month employed is also included. However, as some might have lost their jobs, or have had multiple unstable jobs and displayed a zigzag pattern of employment over time, a more detailed description could be useful. One approach is to calculate the average difference in the number of months employed in the periods before and after the last crime. This is not unproblematic either as a one-month increase in employment might be more relevant for those who were not employed before their last crime than for those who were fully employed. An ad-hoc approach is to report the distribution of the change in the number of months employed by the number of months employed in the period before the last recorded crime. This is shown in Figure 1 as a kernel density plot.[2] We have classified the sample into four different groups, depending on the number of months employed in the five-year period before the last year a crime was committed. We then present the distribution for each group, as well as the group-specific average change in months employed before/after the last registered crime.

[2] The density plot can be thought of as a smoothed histogram, where the area under each curve adds up to 1.

Figure 1 Distribution of changes in months employed before/after the last year a crime was committed. By months employed before last year a crime was committed. Kernel density plot. N=4963.



Note: The density around zero is extremely high for the first group, and this would affect the scale of the y-axis, making the plot for the other groups unintelligible. We have therefore broken the upper part of the y-axis, and let the curve extend a little beyond the plot region to indicate that it continues.

Disregarding the number of months employed before desistance, the overall average change in the number of months employed is -3.05 for the whole sample, suggesting that there is a reduction in the number of months employed on average. Those employed for less than six months in the period before their last crime constitute the largest subgroup (38 percent of the sample). For this group of mostly unemployed persons, there is not much room for a decrease in employment so, to the extent that there is a change, it is an increase in employment. The vast majority, however, do not experience any change in employment at all. That is, they were neither employed before nor after their last crime. Thus, the density curve for this group is concentrated around zero, and the y-axis is clipped to allow the plot of the other groups to be clearly visible. The second largest group consists of those who were employed for 24 months or more in the period before their last crime (33 percent of the sample). In

this group, the proportion that experienced a substantial *decrease* in employment was somewhat larger than for those who experienced an increase. In the two remaining groups who had some employment before their last crime, but not very much, the majority did not experience much change in employment after their last crime, even though quite a few decreased the number of months they were employed. Thus, the main impression is that, although some of them did increase the number of months they were employed, this increase is usually not very large, and a considerable proportion experienced a substantial decrease in employment. It should be mentioned, however, that this measure of employment is somewhat uncertain since it does not capture income or distinguish between part-time and full-time jobs.

Discussion

In this research note, we have selected a sample of serious offenders who have not been registered with a new crime in a five-year period and described how many of these experienced any of a number of life course events around the time of their last crime. The proportions represent an upper bound for how many, at most, desisted because of these transitions. While the numbers who got married, had a child or increased the number of months they were employed might appear to be relatively small, a larger proportion experienced at least one of these events. A total of 47 percent got married, had a child or increased the number of months they were employed, which means that, at most, 47 percent of the sample stopped offending because of such adult transitions. Given that there are at least some selection effects as well, the true proportion who desisted for these reasons is probably lower. Moreover, while many increased the number of months they were employed, a large proportion also experienced a decrease in employment, which means that the average change in months employed is close to zero.

An important caveat is that such results will be contingent upon the definition of desistance or termination of a criminal career, as well as on the definition of the sample. This is the case for all studies of desistance, however, and is not particular to our study. It is quite possible that different definitions would produce somewhat different results. For such reasons, our results may not settle the case, but we do believe they add critical nuances to the debate.

Clearly, our findings do not contradict the dominant theories on desistance, and our upper bound estimate is 47 percent. So almost as much as half of those who desist might do so in relation to life course events, but given that an unknown proportion might reflect selection effects the true number is probably less . Thus, although events such as marriage, childbirths and employment might be

important reasons why offenders desist, these events cannot be the most important reasons why people stop offending. Moreover, some of those who experienced these life events might have desisted anyway, so we cannot be certain that these transitions explain anything at all. Most previous studies have investigated the relative importance of various life events for those who experience each event, which is different from our approach. While marriage, parenthood and employment are central to life course criminology, it is also necessary to point out that a large proportion of those who terminate a criminal career do so for other reasons. Future studies in life course criminology and desistance from crime should explore further the roles of *other* mechanisms leading away from crime.

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