

CHAPTER SIX

Why Some Offenders Stop

Strategy and Background

As discussed in Chapter 2, defining and identifying desistance is problematic. Classification schemes that posit “desisters” as formally distinguishable from “persisters” or other offenders are at some level arbitrary and suspect. At the same time, the concept of desistance has theoretical utility and provides a useful means of organizing our narrative data.

Combining both narrative data and official records, our strategy is to investigate two subgroups of men who desisted from crime. The first group consists of men who were arrested as juveniles (age 7 to 17) for nonviolent crimes only, and were not arrested for any predatory crimes (violence or property) as adults. A few of these men were arrested for speeding or other moving violations as adults as well as for other minor offenses (for example, profanity), but still desisted from interpersonal offending. We interviewed 15 men in this group. The second group consists of 4 men who had at least one arrest for violent crime as a juvenile, but none for predatory crime in adulthood (after the age of 21). Again, we did not consider arrests for minor motor vehicle violations as counting against the men in terms of desistance. Thus we interviewed 19 men we call desisters from serious crime. We compare these two subgroups of desisters to detect any differences in desistance by type of offense.

Criminal history data for the 19 desisters are displayed in Table 6.1, and information regarding other important social characteristics is displayed in Table 6.2. Using available data up to age 70, we find that the “nonviolent desisters” were arrested on average nine times, and by design these men had no arrests for violence at any point in their life. The “violent desisters” were arrested on average twelve times throughout life, and by design all had a violent arrest as a juvenile. Although all of the men were classified as desisters, they did spend time incarcerated in prisons and jails, especially early in their criminal careers. For example, four-fifths, or all but three, of the “nonviolent desisters” stayed out of jail or prison over the adult life course (age 17 to 70), whereas half the “violent desisters” stayed out of jail or prison over their adult life course. Interestingly, both the “nonviolent desisters” and the “violent desisters” were incarcerated as juveniles for 1.4 years on average.

To better understand the processes of persistent offending and desistance from crime over the life course, in the next three chapters we turn to life-history narratives. We present narratives for men who have desisted from crime (Chapter 6), for men who have persisted (Chapter 7), and for the remaining group of men that reveal the zigzag quality of many criminal careers (Chapter 8). Our rationale for using life-history narratives was explained in Chapter 3 and the strengths and weaknesses of these qualitative data were discussed in Chapter 4.

Our strategy wherever possible is to weave back and forth between quantitative and qualitative data. The life histories that follow are informed not only by the trajectory analyses just completed but by further quantitative data on the criminal histories (for example, number of arrests and time served in prison) and social data (for example, proportion of time married) for the 52 men in the follow-up. Then in Chapter 9 we return to a quantitative analysis of life-course trajectories to explain how changes in adult domains—marriage, military experience, and work—are related to changes in criminal activity within individuals over time. This quantitative analysis is informed, in turn, by the narrative data. In the end, our approach represents a blending of diverse methods of data collection and analysis that could not be achieved by exclusive reliance on a single mode of research.

Table 6.1 Desisters: Criminal history data

Name	Total report	Official offenses <17	Official offenses 17-32	Total official offenses ^a	Official offenses ^a	Age first incarcerated	Time served <17 (in years)	Time served 17-32 (in years)	Time served ^b
Henry	13	6	1	7	0	10	2.4	0.0	0.0
Vinnie	11	8	1	9	0	14	1.0	0.0	0.0
Victor	8	4	0	4	0	14	0.6	0.0	0.0
John	10	4	1	6	0	14	1.0	0.0	0.0
Robert	17	4	2	10	0	13	1.9	0.0	0.2
Leon	19	3	0	4	0	12	1.1	0.0	0.0
Stanley	7	2	0	4	0	15	1.0	0.0	0.0
Norman	14	8	0	5	0	15	1.0	0.0	0.0
David	17	4	1	11	0	14	0.7	0.0	0.0
Richard	23	7	0	7	0	13	0.7	0.0	0.0
William	17	3	1	4	0	14	0.6	0.0	0.0
William	17	3	1	4	0	14	0.6	0.0	0.0
William	17	3	1	4	0	14	0.6	0.0	0.0
William	17	3	1	4	0	14	0.6	0.0	0.0
Richard	23	7	0	7	0	13	0.7	0.0	0.0
David	17	4	1	11	0	14	0.7	0.0	0.0
Norman	14	8	0	5	0	15	1.0	0.0	0.0
Stanley	7	2	0	4	0	12	1.1	0.0	0.0
Leon	19	3	0	4	0	12	1.1	0.0	0.0
Robert	17	4	2	10	0	13	1.9	0.0	0.0
John	10	4	1	6	0	14	1.0	0.0	0.0
Victor	8	4	0	4	0	14	0.6	0.0	0.0
Vinnie	11	8	1	9	0	14	1.0	0.0	0.0
Henry	13	6	1	7	0	10	2.4	0.0	0.0
Mean	13.7	5.7	2.7	9.6	0.21	13.2	1.4	1.0	6.6

a. Ages 7 to 70, days incarcerated over lifetime per year.

Table 6.2 Desisters: Social history data

Name	Ethnicity	Age at interview	IQ	Adolescent competence	Proportion of time married ^a	Proportion of time divorced/separated ^a	Proportion of time with unstable employment ^b	Proportion of time in military ^b	Military outcome
Henry	Swedish	69	93	1	0.85	0.06	0.13	0.40	Honorable
Vinnie	Italian	69	86	3	0.96	0.00	0.40	0.20	Honorable
Victor	Lithuanian	69	112	3	0.89	0.00	0.20	0.20	Honorable
John	Czech	70	115	2	0.96	0.00	0.00	0.20	Honorable
Robert	English	71	79	0	0.87	0.00	0.13	0.33	Honorable
Leon	German	70	103	0	0.92	0.00	0.13	0.33	Honorable
Stanley	Polish	69	86	3	0.72	0.00	0.07	0.07	Honorable
Norman	Eng. Can.	69	77	3	0.92	0.00	0.13	0.00	N.A.
David	American	67	75	3	0.62	0.11	0.13	0.00	N.A.
Richard	Eng. Can.	68	101	3	0.92	0.00	0.20	0.07	Honorable
William	Irish	64	90	1	0.83	0.00	0.07	0.93	Honorable
Gilbert	Eng. Can.	65	104	3	0.76	0.00	0.27	0.33	Dishonorable
Domenic	Italian	67	112	2	0.75	0.00	0.07	0.00	N.A.
George	Eng. Can.	68	80	1	0.98	0.00	0.40	0.20	Honorable
Edward	English	67	90	0	0.00	0.00	0.57	0.00	N.A.
Leonard	Fr. Can.	70	90	1	0.81	0.00	0.47	0.00	N.A.
Angelo	Italian	70	90	N.A.	0.92	0.00	0.27	0.13	Honorable
Bruno	Italian	70	92	0	0.87	0.00	0.40	0.27	Honorable
Michael	Irish	63	89	0	0.87	0.00	0.27	0.53	Honorable
Mean		68.2	92.8	1.4	0.80	0.01	0.27	0.24	

Note: On adolescent competence, see note 1. a. Ages 17 to 70.

Table 6.2 presents social history data for these men. Most revealing is that men who desisted from crime are distinguished by long-term stability in marriage and employment. Most of the desisters also had a successful stint in the military, a pattern of stability that holds for both nonviolent and violent desisters. No discernible pattern emerges with respect to ethnicity, IQ scores, or our measure of adolescent competence.¹

We begin with a detailed life history of two men in the group of nonviolent desisters. These cases were selected because they highlight different aspects of the desistance process with regard to family life and military service. We then present one life history from the second group of desisters—men who had a record of violence as adolescents, but none as adults. After presenting these life histories, we draw on the remaining interview data to explore in detail several emerging themes regarding the mechanisms involved in the desistance from crime. We believe life-history narratives are especially valuable in uncovering issues overlooked in more traditional quantitative approaches in criminology. In particular, the following narratives provide rich and nuanced information that we use to further develop our theory of why people stop offending.

Marriage as a Turning Point

If I hadn't met my wife at the time I did, I'd probably be dead.

Consider first the life of Leon. Leon grew up in a large family in a poor neighborhood in Boston. He had nine brothers and sisters, but several of his siblings died young. Leon's father was described as a "heavy drinker." He had been arrested for assault and battery, vandalism, receiving stolen goods, and drunkenness. Leon's mother also had an arrest record for assault and battery and profanity. She too was described in the records as a "heavy drinker." According to the Gluecks' initial investigation in the 1930s, Leon's parents showed little concern for their children, providing lax supervision and erratic discipline. Their home was dirty and the children were neglected. The combination of a large family with inept parenting by two alcoholic parents meant that Leon experienced a rather chaotic family life growing up. As but one example, his family moved more than twenty times while he was a child. In addition, there is some evidence to sug-

gest that Leon's parents condoned his stealing. Despite these unsavory conditions, at his age 14 interview, Leon reported that he was "attached" to both of his parents.

Leon's educational experiences were dismal as well. He went through the seventh grade but quit when he was sent to reform school. Leon's full IQ score was 103, but his verbal IQ score was 83 and his performance IQ was 123—a discrepancy of 40 points. It is well known that verbal deficits are related to delinquency (Moffitt 1993). Because of his poor verbal skills, Leon was placed in a special class, putting him three grades behind other students his age. It comes as no surprise that Leon felt little attachment to school or his teachers, and began skipping school at the age of 7.

Leon was arrested three times as a juvenile for breaking and entering, mainly stores and trucks. He served a little more than one year in reform school. His total self-reported score of "unofficial delinquency" was 19, well above the mean for the delinquent sample (see note 1 for a description of this measure). Like most of the persistent offenders, Leon started his criminal career early—he began playing hooky at the age of 7 and was first arrested at the age of 11. He was also a savvy delinquent. According to notes in his record, Leon became involved in a series of burglaries and lootings of trucks while he was on parole from the Lyman School. The stolen goods included silk stockings that his gang sold around the neighborhood. Leon learned that the police knew who was responsible for the thefts, and he subtly suggested to his parole officer "that he would like to be returned to the Lyman School for having broken his parole by truanting." This strategy enabled Leon to avoid a new set of criminal charges, a potentially longer period of confinement, and a more extensive criminal record.

In contrast to the chaos and disorganization early in his life, Leon's adult life is markedly stable. He lived in only three places in his middle and later years, including a stretch at one address for thirty years. As an adult, he worked as a manager at a donut shop for thirty years and as a laboratory technician at a chemical plant for twelve years. In fact Leon worked more or less continuously from the age of 13. Most of his early employment consisted of low-paying jobs as a movie usher, a furniture mover, a shipper in a bakery, and an attendant in a gasoline station. Despite a seventh-grade education, Leon is now a homeowner who spends his retirement traveling throughout the United States and

Europe with his wife. At the time of our interview, Leon was 70 years old. He looked back on his life with a sense of accomplishment, especially sweetened by the fact that he overcame early hardship and disadvantage. Throughout his adult life, he had been strongly committed to upward mobility and recognized that he could make progress, if only a little bit at a time. What accounts for such change?

Leon served in the U.S. Army between 1946 and 1948. He was drafted at the age of 21, six weeks after he was married. As with many Glueck men, he served a tour of duty in the Far East. After his military service, he used the G.I. Bill to buy a home. Not all is rosy in the military-as-turning point story, however. Leon told us that, like his father, he developed a drinking problem in the service. There is no mention of this fact in his military record (for example, no arrests for drunkenness were recorded), which again underscores the importance of collecting both official and self-report data. As we learn below, Leon still did not become an alcoholic, nor did his early drinking problem hamper his adult development.

At the time of our interview, Leon's major turning point, at least in his own mind, was marriage. He met his wife when he was 17 (she was also 17 years old at the time). Marriage's roles in changing routine activities, as a social investment generating strong social support, and in supplying direct social control all describe Leon's situation. His wife knew he was in trouble as an adolescent, but she decided to take a chance on him anyway. During our interview with Leon, she stated, "I was young and naive." She went on to say,

It wasn't unusual in those days for kids to be in that kind of trouble and for some reason . . . if my daughter took up with anybody like that, I'd go through the roof! We had so many strikes against us. He had no education, he drank. Not when we were together . . . When you think of it, you know, I can't get over how well we've done with how little we had. He had no occupation. He was a baker. And luckily he learned to bake and then he learned to manage, and he was a go-getter, and actually that's all we had going. And I was a fighter and a go-getter. Even though I had a little bit more education, we got so much in common, that's why we get along so well, we like the same things.

Not only did Leon have a record, his mother, a Catholic, strongly disapproved of his marriage for religious reasons. She did not want one of her sons marrying a Protestant. Leon's wife told us that his mother "put a curse on our marriage" because of her unhappiness with the union.

Despite the long odds and lack of family support, Leon's marriage was a success. As a married man, Leon worked every day, did not go out with the guys, and was home every night. At his age 25 interview, Leon stated that he was "quite content to stay at home." Home life became the center of activity for Leon and most other men who desisted from crime. Leon insisted to us that he would have continued getting into trouble if he had not married. Indeed, some fifty years earlier, when asked for the reasons behind his reformation, Leon stated emphatically, "My wife straightened me out." Even before his actual marriage, Leon's parole officer remarked that he had given up drinking and gambling when he became interested in a 17-year-old woman who would later become his wife.

At Leon's age 25 interview, the Gluecks' interviewer remarked on the beneficial influence of his wife. She was described as "respectable," "decent," and with a "stronger personality" than her husband. During this earlier interview, the interviewer wrote that "the couple seem very much in love and made a display of their attachment in an obvious manner." This was our sense at the age 70 interview as well. During our interview, Leon and his wife completed each other's sentences and displayed a great deal of love and affection.

Along with the social support and love that came from this successful marriage, additional factors help explain why Leon was able to desist from crime. First, perhaps in response to his wife's investment in him and vice versa, Leon took his marital responsibilities very seriously. He often worked overtime to support his family. Moreover, later in his career, he turned down a promotion because it would have taken more time away from his wife and children. Second, as a direct result of his marriage, Leon was cut off from his former peer group. These peers were replaced by his wife's friends. At his age 25 interview, Leon disclosed that one of his delinquent friends "went away" for murder. Leon continued, "On the very night of the murder, I had a date with my wife and we went to a dance. If it weren't for my wife, I'd probably be up for murder." Third, Leon spent more time with his wife's family than he did with his own. In fact, the couple moved to get away from his family. They relocated to another part of Boston and his in-laws moved in on the first floor of their two-family home. This action solidified his new family bonds, both practically and symbolically.

Leon and his wife have a rewarding union and are clearly woven together. One of the more poignant moments in the interview came

when they spoke of their son who had died of a heart attack at the age of 45. This heart attack was brought on by drug and alcohol abuse. Rather than dwelling on the loss of their son, the couple focused on the future of their daughter-in-law. Referring to their daughter-in-law, Leon's wife said, "She was an enabler. She did everything for him. All the classic things that you do for alcoholics. She called the boss and told him that he's sick, . . . She learned to be a baker, taking over for [her husband] when he was hung over or drugged over or whatever." The discussion with Leon and his wife continued.

Wife: It was a terrible marriage in that way, because—

Leon: It made it terrible for her, not him.

Wife: It made it terrible for her is right, and it didn't help him at all. I mean, instead of saying, "Look, buddy, you know, get with the program or get out," she didn't. She just kept covering for him and covering for him and covering for him.

Leon: And she's still like a daughter to us today.

Wife: Ruined ten years of her own life.

Leon: An adopted daughter, in fact, . . .

Wife: She remarried a wonderful guy.

Leon: She's doing wonderful, yeah. She's going to school.

Wife: She's a computer expert now. They have these robots that go down to see the fish. She's in charge of that. She does the repair work and everything on those computers, so she's done that all on her own.

Leon: . . . She had ten years of living with a drunken drug addict, and yet she turned her whole life around on her own, once she got away from him.

A second transformative event mentioned in Leon's interview was his institutionalization in the Lyman School. Leon characterized his time at Lyman as a "turning point in his life." He went to Lyman when he was 13 for breaking and entering and skipping school. He described the reform school as offering a "learning environment." Leon recounted:

I mean it might sound silly—I thought it was great. I mean they taught you a lot of things there. They taught you to respect yourself, and no matter what you did you were dressed up every day, you were clean, you went to school, and they just, I mean even like, I used to set the table,

you learned the proper way to set a table . . . I might have been one out of a thousand that got anything out of it, but still, I go back to that whenever I think of a change in my life . . . And I think it was great, I think they ought to have them today instead of having these places where they stick the kids in the halls [detention centers].

Leon and his wife also became involved with meditation—unusual for our sample of delinquents. They took up the practice when they were in their thirties, and they claim it has given them spiritual peace and an overwhelming sense of well-being. Leon declared, "It made me simmer down." Leon's wife described him as "like a hen on a hot griddle" before he took up meditation.

Military Service as a Turning Point

I learned a lot of responsibility there [in the military] and . . . how to follow orders.

Here we examine the life history of another desister we call Henry. Like Leon, Henry experienced no arrests for predatory crimes of violence or property as an adult. His narrative brings into play new elements that add further complexity to our understanding of how movement away from criminal behavior is sustained.

Henry, at the age of 69, was interviewed by telephone at his retirement home on the southwest coast of Florida. Although possessing only an eighth-grade education, Henry worked as a machinist nearly all of his adult life. Employed most of his life, he stated emphatically, "I was never without a job." This glimpse of Henry's life as an adult provides a dramatic contrast to his childhood and adolescent experiences.

Henry grew up in slum areas in Boston. At the time of the wave 1 interview, Henry's family lived in a deteriorated wooden tenement district close by the waterfront. Like many delinquents, Henry often changed schools because his family moved excessively (at least once a year). He repeated grades one and four and from age 10 was frequently truant. According to teacher reports, Henry seemed childish and immature. His overall IQ score was 93 (79 verbal and 107 performance).

Henry's home conditions were considered very poor by the Gluecks' research team. At the time of the interview, his mother and

father had been separated for four years. Henry and three sisters were living with their mother. She was described as being “careless in her appearance, some of her front teeth missing, and her fingers heavily stained from cigarette smoke.” Henry’s father was described as a “heavy drinker.” In fact, Henry’s father was a weekend drinker who went on “benders.” When he drank he was verbally abusive to the children and his wife. One illustration from Henry’s file described the following: “When the father went to bed, he would stick a knife in the closed bedroom door explaining that if anyone opened the door during the night the knife would fall on them and kill them.” Despite this family situation, a psychiatrist noted that Henry “seems very fond of his father” and hoped to be paroled to his father.

Henry’s mother had her husband committed to Boston State Hospital for observation. He was “paranoid” and claimed that he could not work because he had to keep an eye on his wife. Furthermore, he questioned the paternity of the children and accused his wife of child neglect. There is a notation in Henry’s file that his mother had an affair with his uncle, his maternal aunt’s husband. Henry’s father had disappeared and was therefore not providing any child support. As a result, the family was living on welfare.

At his wave 1 interview, Henry was described as a stubborn child, a truant, a runaway, and a beggar. He apparently committed thefts to get money for candy and the movies. Henry’s first arrest occurred at the age of 10 and the charge was stubbornness. Overall, Henry had six arrests as a juvenile.

One of the most important events in Henry’s life was his decision to join the Marine Corps at age 18. He served three years in the Marines (from 1945 to 1948). Henry achieved the rank of corporal, and he received the Good Conduct Medal and the Victory Medal for World War II. Then he joined the Air National Reserves for two years. At the end of the two years, he was called back to the service—“convenience of the government, they called it, COG.” He served again from 1950 to 1951. Henry used the G.I. Bill when he left the service to receive on-the-job training as a machinist. Looking back on the military, Henry maintained that it was a very important part of his life. He declared: “I learned a lot. It was just a big part of my life and I liked it.” When asked further about the precise change-inducing elements of serving in the military, Henry stated, “It taught me a lot of responsibility and things like that.”

The ordeal of reform school was also a transforming experience for Henry, as it was for Leon. When asked whether he experienced any turning points or things that happened that pushed him in a direction other than he might have gone, Henry responded that his turning point was being sent to the Lyman School for Boys. “That was a big turning point in my life . . . I think that helped straighten me out quite a bit that Lyman School.” When pressed on what it was about the Lyman School that changed him, Henry said, “Well, I started learning a lot of responsibility. Taking more responsibility—to stay on the good side because I used to do a lot of skipping school and stuff like that. I think that taught me to grow up, I’d just go to school and learn what you can and do what you can.” For Henry, going to reform school twice facilitated his desistance from crime. “I didn’t want to go back . . . It’s not a reform school but like a reform school. It was like a real, private, strict school. They were very strict. If you needed a whack, you’d get a whack . . . I think it helped me a lot.”

The parallel experiences between the military and the Lyman School in Henry’s life are clear. In both institutions, Henry learned “responsibility” and “how to follow orders.” Reflecting back over the long term, Henry considered both experiences as turning points in his life. He described both institutions as “helping him out a lot.” Both institutions facilitated and perhaps redirected the natural process of maturation. In large part, Henry was a defiant adolescent who did not like to be told what to do. In his own words, he did not “like to be ordered around.” He went on to say, “My main problem I think when I was growing up, not liking school, skipping school, and not taking authority the way I should.” This was something that he “grew out of” with the help of the Lyman School and his military experience.

Nevertheless, the story of pure social causation is complicated by Henry’s own actions. According to information in his file from his parole officer, Henry was “unable to get along with either his mother or his stepfather,” and he “selected the service as his ‘out’ for his problems.” Henry’s parole officer further speculated that Henry was “intelligent enough to realize that part of his difficulties existed in his home and that the U.S. Marine Corps might give him a second chance in the service to make good under closer supervision than what the U.S. Maritime Service gave him.”

The timing of these institutional engagements and life-course events is also important. After serving a sentence in the Lyman School for

Boys, Henry reported that he joined the Maritime Service at age 16, two years before he joined the Marine Corps. Unfortunately, serving in the Maritime Service did not work out. Henry went AWOL and received a dishonorable discharge. In effect Henry simply continued his antisocial behavior, especially regarding the following of rules and orders. At age 18, however, the Marine Corps was one of his self-described life-course turning points. Although the Maritime Service and the Marine Corps are not strictly comparable, it seems that the timing of these two experiences is crucial. It should be noted that Henry did not reveal to the Marines that he had been dishonorably discharged from the U.S. Maritime Service or that he was on parole from the Lyman School for Boys.

According to Henry, another significant element in his life was a move from the city to what was then a country setting. Henry recalled these residential changes as significant in facilitating desistance: "Well, I think my family—my Mom and Dad—moving out of the Boston area had a lot to do with it also. Originally we had lived in a town about twenty miles north of Boston. And it's a completely different scenario. It's like living out in the country. Getting away from the Boston environment that it had at that time [1930s and 1940s] had a lot to do with it." Given that these moves occurred before his unsuccessful stint in the U.S. Maritime Service, it is not clear what role they played in the desistance process. Nevertheless, Henry described these events as important turning points.

In looking back on his life, Henry saw marked improvement given his childhood and adolescent experiences. He feels "fortunate that things had turned out the way they did," and he has a sense of accomplishment from overcoming disadvantage and hardship early in life. This is true of Leon as well. Displaying a sense of generativity, Henry also believed that things were more promising for his children and that he could help them have a better start in life than he did.

The Lyman School as a Turning Point

Everybody should do a stretch in Lyman.

The next life history we profile in this chapter comes from a man called Bruno. Bruno grew up in a large Italian family in East Boston. He had seven siblings. Although there is evidence in the Gluecks' in-

terview of strong emotional attachment in the family, Bruno was not well supervised during adolescence. He talked about frequently staying out late at night and returning after his parents went to bed. They never knew what time he came into the house. Bruno also had little interest in school as a kid. He repeated two grades and eventually quit school at age 16. He went up to the ninth grade. Although he had a full-scale IQ score of 92, his teacher thought he reached his "intellectual ceiling" in eighth grade.

As a youth, Bruno was the leader of a small but tough street gang that encouraged his delinquent behavior. He had six arrests as a juvenile, including one for violence (he and two friends were drinking and got involved in a brawl on New Year's Eve). Bruno and his companions were also arrested for "jack rollings," but they were formally charged with larceny, not robbery, for this crime. In total, Bruno spent about six months in the Lyman School for Boys for his crimes.

As an adult, Bruno refrained from any criminal activity. Like Leon, Bruno's adult life displayed remarkable stability across several important life domains. For instance, at the time of our interview, Bruno had been married for forty-six years. He went into business for himself as a plumber when he got married. At age 70 when we spoke to him, he had recently retired from the plumbing business. Bruno spent his entire life in one neighborhood in Boston. At his age 32 interview, he and his wife had lived in his mother's house for about seven years. From there they moved to their current address, where they have lived for the past thirty-eight years. This residence was originally his mother in-law's house.

Bruno maintained close ties to his family by virtue of his living arrangement: "My wife and I live here [the first floor of the three-decker where the interview was conducted]. My son lives upstairs with his wife and their two daughters. My daughter lives up another flight with her husband and baby boy. And then my other guy lives up the street."

As was true for Henry, one of the major self-reported turning points in Bruno's life was serving in the military. He enlisted and served three years in the Marine Corps. Like many of his cohort, he saw action in the war in the Pacific theater. Bruno achieved the rank of corporal, and he received the Good Conduct Medal and the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with two Bronze Stars. When he returned to Boston, he used the G.I. Bill to become a plumber, a skilled trade. Bruno

recounted, "I wouldn't have been able to learn to be a plumber because I didn't have the money for school, but when I went under the G.I. Bill, it cost the government the money to teach me. It was like an apprenticeship."

Like Leon and Henry, and once again surprising to us, Bruno thought one of the other turning points in his life was getting sent to the Lyman School for Boys.

It was positive, it was good. I'll tell ya', everybody should do a stretch in Lyman, because the people don't hurt you. If you were in a disciplinary cottage, yes. But they deserved to get shellacked. But I never did. While I was up there, I became a painter. We used to paint boats down around the harbor there. Then from that we would . . . you know you pick certain jobs. So, in other words, every chance I had I'd try to do better, because I wanted to get out. I wanted to go home. I missed my mother's cooking.

This account is consistent with what he told the Gluecks' interviewer more than forty years before our interview. In that interview, Bruno admitted that he deserved to be sent to Lyman and that his commitment convinced him to "respect the things that count in life." In addition, Bruno said that Lyman was "the best thing that ever happened" because he was placed under "firm authority and close supervision." There was a definite change in Bruno because of the Lyman experience. Before Lyman, he described himself as a "wise guy—I knew all the answers and no one could tell me anything. My father did the best he could, but I thought I knew more than he did."

In the aftermath of his Lyman experience, Bruno was not allowed to associate with the friends that he got in trouble with earlier in his career. He recalled, "I had two brothers that used to watch me—no watch me—they used to kick the shit out of me in plain English. But never enough to hurt me, but enough for me to think."

For Bruno, then, the crucial factors appeared to be the Lyman School and his military experience. What is significant is that the factors that facilitated Bruno's desistance from crime after adolescence are the same as those that facilitated desistance for Henry and Leon, despite the fact that Bruno was involved in violence as a youth. These narratives, plus those described below, suggest a general process of crime cessation that is not necessarily distinguished by crime type. This perspective on desistance is consistent with the general theory of

crime we presented in Chapter 3, which also does not distinguish distinct causal mechanisms for crimes of violence compared with crimes of property. We turn to a deeper exploration of these mechanisms.

Unpacking the Desistance Process

In examining desistance, several themes emerge in the life histories profiled so far. Despite early instability, rancor, and family chaos, men who desisted from crime exhibited remarkable stability and organization across several adult life domains—work, marriage, and living arrangements. Self-identified turning points included marriage, serving in the military, being sent to the Lyman School for Boys, residential relocation, and becoming involved in meditation. One unexpected finding was the positive aspect of the reform-school experience for these former delinquents. The reform-school experience was especially salient for some men when coupled with serving in the military, a fact that suggests the need to examine further the Lyman School–military connection. A second surprise was that although all three men we profiled displayed remarkable employment stability in light of their childhood and adolescent backgrounds, none of them pointed to work as a major turning point in his life. This suggests that stable work may not trigger a change in an antisocial trajectory in the way that marriage or serving in the military does, even though employment may play an important role in sustaining the process of desistance. In this section, we examine these themes in more detail, drawing on the additional interviews we conducted.

Lyman School

For some men, the Lyman School provided an important setting in which to acquire the discipline and structure that were absent from their young lives. The Lyman School also was a place where they could perform tasks that they would be rewarded for, in sharp contrast to many of their school and family experiences. For others, the Lyman School represented a purely deterrent force. For example, Angelo did not go back because he "learned that he did not want to do the time." Several others expressed the same feeling. Angelo went on to tell us that he had a "very distinct recollection" of the Lyman School. A guard "gave me a crack on the mouth that I still can remember and feel today. And I have a vengeance for him that you can't be-

lieve. But it did teach me to respect society or whoever.” He concluded, “If you haven’t got the time, you don’t do the crime. Lyman was a turning point in the sense that I don’t want to do the time.” For others, Lyman provided an environment for learning important lessons about life. As Stanley said, “I learned how to be away from home and how to get along with other people.”

The Lyman-Military Nexus

Perhaps even more important, several men alluded to a Lyman-military connection. There are important commonalities in the two experiences for men who later desisted from crime. For instance, Richard identified the parallel themes between the two institutions as “discipline and strictness.” In addition, he noted the capacity of both institutions to “give kids something they never had at home.” For Richard at both places, “Somebody took me under their wing and that was it. It changed my life.” In a similar vein, at his age 25 interview, John said that he believed his correctional school experiences helped him considerably in adjusting to Navy life, as he learned at the Lyman School to accept authority and to live with large groups of other boys harmoniously. In his interview at age 63, Michael also noted the similarities between reform school and the military: “Well a lot of people can’t adjust to stuff like that. I was in reform school and all that. Like I told you—You got to get up. Gotta go to bed. You got to eat. It was just like the military. You get up at a certain time. And you eat at a certain time. You do calisthenics at a certain time. You go to bed at a certain time. I’m used to it.”

But what is also evident from our interviews is that the Lyman School was not the right experience for all men, nor was it necessarily a turning point, positive or negative. For instance, in his interview at age 67, David told us that staying at Lyman was a horrible experience. He continued:

It was bad. Real bad. You see these pictures about torturing the kids. Well, they did then, let me tell you. Well, we’d come in from a march out in the cold, and . . . and you were walking beside him [another inmate] and I says “How is everything going today?” and the counselor heard you he’d take you back in the room and take your shoes off and you had to hold your feet up with no shoes on and he had a stick that big [about two feet long] and that thick [about two inches] he’d give you 10 whacks. Now you can’t walk. And if you dropped your foot down you’d

get another 10. I mean the pain was right up through your leg. And then they’d take you in the corner and they’d pound the living shit out of you.

When asked how long he had been in reform school, David recalled the exact number of days he was there—“13 months, 2 weeks, and 3 days—made it to Saturday.” This was more than fifty years after his Lyman incarceration.

What is harder to untangle is why those who had adverse experiences in Lyman did not react negatively to those experiences by committing crime or displaying other forms of poor adaptation as an adult. For instance, Victor talked about beatings, cold showers, and endless marching at Lyman. His view of the Lyman School experience was prosaic—“I didn’t learn anything up there, except not to go back. That’s about it.” This came from a man who was sent to Lyman because his father was the town drunk and the probation officers had it in for his father. Despite his apparently unjust incarceration, Victor did not go on to commit any more crimes during adolescence or adulthood.

Gilbert, another desister, recalled Lyman:

I was mistreated back then. There was people that ran these cottages and they beat the devil out of you and beat on the bottom of your feet with a stick when you ran away and they’d get you down on the floor and make you scrub the floor with an old bristle brush that was just wood against wood. And demoralize you—make you stand in line with your arms folded and demoralize you as a young person. I was only, cripes, a young kid then. And I remember these points vividly in my mind—how I was treated at Lyman School. I was always running away. Some of the people I couldn’t stand—there were sex deviants there too. All kinds of crazy stuff going on.

Remarkably, Gilbert remembered the guard’s name who beat him. He exclaimed, “Can you imagine? Here I am talking about how many years ago when I can remember this guy’s name . . . It’s unbelievable. When I could remember a man’s name that used to beat me on the bottom of my feet with a stick, trying to tell me that I won’t have any more feet to run away with.”

Military Service

Our quantitative data for the desisters show that several had a successful tour of duty in the military (see Table 6.2). Moreover, several

men who desisted from crime described the military as a turning point in their interview (see also Sampson and Laub 1996). The following statement from Victor highlights this point.

I'd say the turning point was, number one, the Army. You get into an outfit, you had a sense of belonging, you made your friends. I think I became a pretty good judge of character. You met some good ones, you met some foul balls. And things along that line. There was more of a spirit of camaraderie there, togetherness, you know, you come to rely on the friends you make, you know. And even if you didn't like the guy you wouldn't throw him to the dogs. There's no question that the fittest survive and you have to learn to get along with everybody.

The timing of the military experience for this cohort of men, who were raised during the Great Depression, is crucial as well. The military in the 1940s represents something quite different from the military today. Patriotism and pride in the military during the World War II era were abundant. But even more significant, the military offered clothes, shelter, meals, discipline, and structure to men who had little. Several men we talked to about the military mentioned food. John recalled:

I thought a turning point was joining the Navy. Oh, sure, everybody squawked about the food. And I'm laughing myself, because I had nothing. Where the hell can you have roast beef on a Monday for supper and then have roast pork? If we had roast beef [in Boston], we had it once a month. So I appreciated it. Like I said I only had a couple of bad meals. Like on a Sunday night, that bologna . . . we used to call it. Every other meal, even breakfast, was good. That was my turning point.

For more on what the military offered to disadvantaged youth, we turn again to Victor's interview:

Well, number one, you had guys that were coming out of the Depression. They got out of school and there were no jobs around, that was number one. And a lot of my friends, they're a little older than I am, a lot of those jumped into the National Guard to pick up a few extra bucks and they got a uniform. A lot of guys went into the service in World War II, a lot of them didn't know what three squares a day was. And I can remember a picture I saw in *Life* magazine pertaining to that. It showed a black from Georgia going back home on leave and everybody's just sitting on the porch and they're feeling his uniform and everything else. They never saw threads like that. He's got shoes on, you

know? But, like I say, put three meals on the table, and then the Army too in those days didn't take any shit. You went and did your thing. If you want to be a wise ass, they had ways of taking care of you. Like I can remember, going out to the obstacle course and dig a 6 × 6. That's 6 feet square, 6 feet deep. He'd throw our newspaper in and then he buried it up, bury it, and say, "What was the headline?" Dig it up, and take a look. Shit details, KP, things like that. They had a way of getting back at you.

Another man we interviewed further added that the military taught him to control his temper, the value of helping others, and the need to follow orders. As William pointed out, "They teach you that you can be your own boss as long as you do what the other people want you to do."

It is also important to note that the military offered something concrete to men when they returned to civilian life—the G.I. Bill. The importance of this voluntary "aftercare" program should not be underestimated (see Sampson and Laub 1996). To illustrate, we examine John's experience in the military. While on parole at the age of 17, John enlisted in the Navy. He received important skill training as an electrician in the Navy, a career he would eventually work in all of his life. When he left the service, he used the G.I. Bill. But even more important for John was the fact that his veteran status overrode his ethnic status in joining the union. He told us,

I worked for [name of company] the last four months of '41. I went to the service from there. Congress passed a law saying that anybody leaving their job voluntarily would come back to the same place—regular seniority. And I went back there [in 1945] and they were non-union. In 1946 they had to go union because they had a bank that they couldn't get on the job unless they were a union shop. And they went, "Hey, sign me up." I happened to be one of the guys there who was working there as non-union and then I got into the union. At the time with my name, which looks real Italian—I'm not Italian—it was an Irish union. "What are you, Ginzo?" But I got in the union. They took 200 veterans. The VA made them do it. I was about the 180th or something like that, that close. That was 1947. I was an apprentice for four years. You had to be an apprentice in the union. So I had my license at the end of three years. I was just hanging for a year—but I was getting the G.I. Bill, which paid up to five cents under an hour. In other words if I was getting \$1.80 an hour at the time, I can get up to \$1.75 with the G.I. Bill. It was pretty

good; it was helpful with four kids. My biggest help was the G.I. Bill of Rights. It raised my pay up to five cents under what a journeyman would make.

As discussed in Chapter 3, military service has the potential to be a transformative experience, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For some men the military, like the Lyman School, provided the opportunity to learn a new set of skills, both technical and interpersonal, in a new and different environment. Moreover, being in the military meant one could make use of the G.I. Bill, a bridge that allowed disadvantaged men to gain access to jobs, technical training, and even housing to facilitate their efforts to start anew.

Marriage

Unlike the persistent offenders described in the next chapter, the sisters had stable marriages, with divorce or separation conspicuously absent (see Table 6.2 for details). Indeed, from several narrative accounts, we learned that one of the sources of desistance is a successful marriage. This was illustrated most directly by Leon, who had been married for forty-nine years when he was interviewed at age 70. He said, "If I hadn't met my wife at the time I did, I'd probably be dead. It just changed my whole life . . . that's my turning point right there." Leon is not alone. Several men we interviewed told us that marriage was their turning point and that their criminal and deviant behavior changed as a direct result of getting married. For example, in response to the question "When you look at your life, do you think you've had turning points?" Domenic said, "Oh, sure. My biggest turning point is when I met my wife." Stanley stated proudly, "I gave up drinking after I got married." Similarly, William insisted, "The thing that changed me was marriage. That turned me right straight down the line. She won't put up with any baloney. Well, if you got a job you're supposed to do what the boss wants. I call her the boss. No, we're both the boss, [but] she's got more head than I have. She's got more schooling, she knows more. And I agree with her." For these subjects, marriage was part of "being a man" and that required becoming "serious and responsible."

As discussed in Chapter 3, marriage has the potential to change one's life across several dimensions. We have written extensively

about the role of marital attachment and the increased social capital that results from a "good marriage" (see Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 1993; and Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). What has not received enough attention is the role that marriage plays in restructuring routine activities and the direct social control that spouses provide, especially concerning deviant peer group associations.

One wife of a former delinquent, for example, talked about her husband's joining the Elks Club. That club became the place where he spent his leisure time, rather than a bar in Charlestown where his former delinquent friends congregated. She went on to point out that from her perspective, "It is not how many beers you have, it's who you drink with that matters." Graham and Bowling (1995, 71) have shown that continued involvement in offending is closely associated with heavy alcohol use with friends of the same inclination, and wives can provide the triggering influence to extract husbands from this deviant lifestyle (see also Warr 1998; Farrington and West 1995). Marriage can also lead to a residential change. When asked why he left East Boston, Angelo told us, "Because I got married. I got married and I married a girl from Malden and we lived in Malden." As Kenaszchuk (1996) found in his study of good marriages among a subsample of Glueck delinquents up to age 32, a residential change allowed the men to break away from unsatisfactory family and peer relationships that were, or were expected to be, problematic to the husband-wife dyad.

Parenting responsibilities also lead to changes in routine activities, as more time is spent in family-centered activities rather than in unstructured time with peers. Although becoming a parent was not a significant factor in explaining desistance from crime once marital attachment was taken into account (Sampson and Laub 1993), the life-history narratives suggest that parenting was important. For example, shortly after marriage and becoming a father, one former delinquent bought property in New Hampshire and spent each weekend clearing the land and building a summer getaway for his wife and children. Another man told us that he and his wife had one child and they "poured it all out to her." Along with changing routine activities, having children can also influence a person's identity and sense of maturity and responsibility (Graham and Bowling 1995, 72-73).

Perhaps the most unexpected finding emerging from the life histories is that marriage may lead to desistance because of the direct social control effects by spouses. This social control feature may be especially true of marriages in the 1950s and 1960s, which we are examining here. Along with providing a base of social support, wives took primary control of the planning and management of the household and acted as informal “guardians” of their husbands’ activities.² Some wives “managed” their husband’s deviance; others adopted a strict “zero-tolerance” policy. For example, David’s wife controlled the pace and timing of his drinking: “Like we had [only] two or three hours [at the bar]. You could drink eight or 10 beers and a couple of shots in that time so that would be enough.” His wife also managed to get him to work after a bout with drinking: “What she did is—I went to work every day . . . before I never worked. I’d say, ‘The hell with it, why should I go to work?’” David felt an obligation to his family that was reinforced by his wife’s presence and constant reminders. “I had to get the money to support the house. If I didn’t have that, why would I have to quit drinking and go to work? I think that pushed me to a point anyways.”

This view was shared by other men we interviewed. William talked about his sister and later his wife providing supervision and monitoring while he was an adult. Bruno was reluctant to sign the consent form to be interviewed without his wife’s permission. He said that he didn’t “want to start any trouble with the old lady, you know?” We left the consent form with him and he mailed it back to us after his wife had looked it over.

The experience of a wife taking a direct role in the social control of the man was explicit in the life of one man we interviewed. Before marriage, Leonard’s wife told him directly, “Your friends or me.” This man was a serious delinquent and had served time as a young adult for burglary, auto theft, and larceny. Upon learning of her impending marriage, friends told her, “Are you out of your mind? He is never going to be anything. He will always be in trouble.” Leonard’s wife, however, would not tolerate crime or any other misbehavior. At the early stages of their marriage, Leonard wanted to quit his job because he felt he was not making enough money. Like the persistent offenders we describe in Chapter 7, Leonard was not scared of prison and he sought easy money. He told his wife, “I am making peanuts. I can

make this money in one day.” His wife told him, “You quit, you leave.” Leonard took his wife’s advice (or followed her orders)—he stayed with his employer for forty-three years and was never involved in crime again. At the time of our interview, furthermore, he had been married for forty-three years and the couple had lived at the same residence for the last thirty-two years. This life story illustrates the reciprocal nature of social support invested by spouses.

For some men, wives were like bosses, but for others, wives played a different role. For some men, a wife was one of the first people to care for them and about them. In this instance, the marriage represented a fusion of interests and shared goals for the future. For instance, George told us that his wife cared for him and that this was the first time in his life that another person had felt this way toward him. Moreover, his in-laws “surrounded” him and adopted him into their family. This acceptance contrasts sharply with his own family, where he had little contact with his siblings and parents. Vaillant has argued that during recovery from alcohol abuse it is valuable for alcoholics to form bonds with people who have not hurt them in the past (1988, 1154; see also Shover 1985, 1996). Satisfying relationships can offer a “new sense of direction and achieve a sense of belonging” (Graham and Bowling 1995, 72).

Additional benefits of marriage deserve mention. Some men married women who were smarter or more talented than they, and the partnership helped them enormously in organizing and managing their affairs as an adult. Many wives finished high school, whereas most of the delinquents did not. Moreover, some delinquents married women from families that were better off economically than they were. “Marrying up” provided many concrete benefits, such as housing, employment, and other material goods.

It should be pointed out that these changes are more gradual than abrupt. Our conceptualization suggests that because investment in social relationships is gradual and cumulative, resulting desistance will be gradual and cumulative (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). As the wife of a former delinquent said, “The change did not happen overnight.” This woman told us that she worried her husband would return to crime. He worked in the neighborhood he grew up in and saw many of his friends who were still involved in criminal activity. For instance, she spoke of worrying each time he was late from work. She

went on to say, "It took about five to six years into the marriage before I could relax. Once the company he worked for moved out of Boston, I knew there would be no problem."

Employment

The men we interviewed who desisted from crime displayed marked stability in employment (see Table 6.2). As we noted in Chapter 3, we believe that the processes for work are similar to those for marriage. In our previous writing, we focused on the role of job stability—length of employment and work habits—in facilitating desistance from crime (Sampson and Laub 1993). Here we broaden our perspective to focus on how work changes routine activities; how employers, like spouses, can provide direct social control; and how work can change one's sense of identity and meaning of life. Following this line of thought, we find that stable work, while not necessarily self-defined as a major turning point, does play an integral role in the process of desistance from crime.

From the life-history narratives, a steady paycheck from work was evidently an indicator of stability and responsibility. As Domenic said, "I had a paycheck coming in every week without fail. I always knew that it was going to be there, or even if I got sick. So that makes you stable and that takes a lot of worry out of your life." This perception rings true particularly for men growing up in the Great Depression.

The men were employed in a wide range of jobs, which included work as a cab driver, fire fighter, boiler maker, construction worker, pipe-covering installer, postal worker, engineer, and stove repairman. Some men clearly enjoyed their work, and for them work was an end in itself. Gilbert claimed that work allowed him to show "what he was best at." He went on to say, "I was best at doing what I enjoy doing and it benefited the world because I got things done. It benefited society because I was able to work at what I felt was good for me because I knew a lot about it. I felt good at doing it." But for most men, work was something that one did as a means to an end. It was simply a way to make money to live as comfortable an existence as possible.³

In addition, work served a social control function. Mostly this was an informal by-product of working, but sometimes the social control function was direct. In fact, some employers kept their employees in line. For example, Leonard said that his employer was "like a strict father. He went after me a few times. He also took me under his wing.

We would have a few drinks together." Leonard was such a valued and dedicated employee that the company bought him the house he now lives in and buys him a luxury car every two or three years for his good work. (Recall that Leonard initially wanted to quit this job because he believed he was underpaid.)

Work also provided a structured routine. Perhaps a dramatic example, but John told us that working as an electrician he "averaged 3,400 hours a year." He added, "I didn't work all the time; I was sleeping half the time . . . I did a lot of work. I'd get up at 5:30 in the morning for at least 25 years. I did it for years. You're used to it; it's a trend." Many men who desisted from crime worked extensively. It was also not unusual for men to work nights and/or weekends. If given the opportunity, the men often worked overtime. It was also true that many of the men's wives worked outside the home as well, further structuring routine activities.

Finally, though not common, work gave some men an identity and sense of accomplishment. Gilbert told us, "Being able to work, being able to get a pay check. Being able to spend the money and not have to steal it. Being able to go to the store and buy something and not have to steal it. That's important in life . . . what changed my life is work."

Other Circumstances

It is possible that desistance can occur "unnaturally"; that is, without any institutional or personal intervention that changes a criminal pathway. As discussed in Chapter 2, desistance by death is possible. Desistance can also result from physical injury. For example, Vinnie was physically disabled because of an injury he received in the military. At the time of the interview (at age 69), he had not worked for the past thirty years or more.

Other circumstances can also lead to desistance from crime. For instance, Norman was a born-again Christian and a strong believer in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). He is one of the few Glueck men who changed because of either formal religion or AA. According to Norman, he was turned around by his wife's insistence that he leave the household and get help for his drinking. At our interview, he gave the following account:

Norman: Well, I had come home drunk and I got into a fight with my wife. I guess I had beaten her and my daughter too—my

stepdaughter. They called the cops. That was the only time she ever called the cops on me in her life. That's the best thing she ever done for me. That's when I went out looking for help.

Q: So you got arrested then?

Norman: Well, I don't know if you call it getting arrested or not.

But I was in a cell overnight. They put me in the tank there overnight with the rest of the drunks. And I was ready to face the judge the next morning. And I guess my wife and my daughter came down. They were going to press charges against me. And a clerk of the court called me over out of the group and told me that they were there and that they told me if I would promise to stop drinking and leave the house that they wouldn't press any charges against me. It sounded pretty good so I promised them I would, so I didn't have to face the judge. They let me go. And when I came back home, I went into the house. There was nobody home. I felt pretty lousy, so I dropped into the bed and fell asleep. And when my wife come home she come into the bedroom and she says, "What are you doing here?" I says, "What do you mean what am I doing here? I live here." She says, "Not any more you don't." I says, "Why, what are you talking about?" She said, "You were supposed to leave. You promised me and you told right in front of the cops and everything that you were going to leave and that you were going to get help for yourself. Try to find out what was wrong, why you were drinking so much and all." I got down on my knees and I begged her and stuff, but she stuck to her guns though. As I say it's the best thing she's ever done. Because that's when I went out . . . called my mother and stayed with my mother and father for a while. But they both drank. So they got into arguments and everything and I got into the middle of it and here I am trying to stop drinking. So I moved out and got myself a room over in South Boston, right near the job where I worked. I was working over a boiler over at the [name of company] in South Boston. I could walk to work from where my room was. And then I went and talked to Father [name] with the Gavin House in South Boston.⁴

Norman told us that he had been in all of the correctional institutions in Massachusetts as part of an AA group talking to prisoners.

Some men also benefited from a residential change, independent of marriage. As noted above, Henry moved from a poor Boston neighborhood to a small town twenty miles outside of Boston. Another subject, George, escaped from the Lyman School and went to live with relatives out of state. He told us that he knew he could not go back to his old neighborhood in Boston because he would find himself in jail or dead if he did.

For others, mentors were important in steering them away from crime. Gilbert told us that while he was in federal prison he learned "a lot about life from a guy down there named Jack. He was an amateur radio guy in the service . . . he loved amateur radio. And he got me interested in radio and electrical stuff and things of that nature." Jack was an electrician who worked in the prison. Gilbert went on, "I'm still a young guy. He saw the potentials in me. He saw I enjoyed electricity. I enjoyed radio and stuff like that. He took me under his wing. And I thought an awful lot of this guy in a short ten months I worked with him. He was a prince." Gilbert concluded, "I prepared my whole life in ten months to do something. Think about it. Those ten months I spent in [name of prison] were the most crucial in my life. Because they turned me around. [Name of prison] turned me around. Jack turned me around. Jack was a humanitarian and cared for me as an individual. Let's get down to brass tacks. What if Jack wasn't there? What if I wasn't offered the opportunity? . . . He treated me right. As a matter of fact, after I left [name of prison] year after year on a yearly basis I would take my wife and the kids, we'd drive all the way to [name of prison] to see Jack."

The Missing Link in Desistance: Human Agency

Not because of my mother and father. Because of me. I'm the one that made it shitty.

We have argued that life histories are especially useful in uncovering ideas that have not been examined in previous research. What is most striking in the narratives we collected is the role of human agency, or choice, in desistance from crime and deviance. The men who desisted are "active" players in the desistance process. Cohler (1982) has noted that a subjective reconstruction of the self is especially likely at times of transition (see also Emirbayer and Mische 1998,

1004). Several examples emerge from the life-history narratives that we collected.

For example, Michael went into the military to avoid trouble. When asked why he entered the service, he answered ironically, "I had no choice. If I'd a gone back out when I left Shirley [a reform school in Massachusetts]—If I'd a gone back out on the corner—I'd get mixed up with the same gang that I got involved with, so I didn't want to do that. So I just went in. And the reason I stayed in was I didn't want to get out, because I would get mixed up with the guys again." This was a conscious decision on Michael's part in light of his perception of the situation. Michael was in the Army for seven years. He told us with a smile that the decision to stay in the military so long "probably saved my bacon." Reflecting back on the importance of the military experience in his life, Michael chuckled and said,

Well you can say that the army changed me. If I had gotten out the first time, I'd probably [have] gone back with the same crowd that I grew up with. And I probably would have ended in jail, because that's the way I was heading . . . I wouldn't take a million bucks for my experience . . . I loved it. I was brought up in a ghetto. And I struggled my way out. If the military had not been available, I tell you what—I'd hate to say what I would have become.

As we learned above, Norman actively participated in Alcoholics Anonymous to try to get his family back. His wife and daughter left him after tiring of his drinking and violence in the home. Norman told us,

I used to slap her and [the] kids around and stuff until I was put out. I was out of the house until she ended up in the hospital . . . She had a nervous breakdown and she was under a psychiatrist's care. She had shock treatments and everything. When she got sick and went to the hospital she asked me if I could move home and take care of the children until she got out of the hospital. And I said, "Sure." I've been staying sober all the time. I went to AA and I haven't had a drink since my first meeting.

Norman changed with the help of AA, and what motivated him in large part was the fear of losing his wife and family if he did not straighten out.

Similarly, John worked hard all of his life to provide for his family. He did not want his children to repeat his own experiences growing up. John's parents separated and his father left the family when he

was ten years old. His father was arrested for assault and battery and was known as an alcoholic and a wife beater. John was ready and willing to take advantage of opportunities that came his way to avoid repeating what he saw as his father's mistakes. He always worked overtime. John recounted, "If you don't mind working, anybody can do it, really, if you have the opportunity. I really didn't have an opportunity even to get into the union, unless I was a G.I. My main thing at the time, I didn't have an Irish name, although I'm 3/4 Irish. I didn't have the Irish name. That was the union then." John worked as an electrician all of his life up to his retirement in 1990. When we interviewed him at the age of 70, he was living comfortably in retirement in a waterfront condo on the South Shore in metropolitan Boston.

Accounts in Later Life

The men who desisted from crime accepted responsibility for their actions and freely admitted getting in trouble. Some of the men were "not proud" of what they had done, but they saw that period of their life as long over. They did not, however, offer excuses. Tough times due to the Great Depression, uncaring parents, poor schools, discrimination based on ethnicity and class, and the like were not invoked to explain their criminal pasts. Michael captured this opinion best when he said, "Not because of my mother and father. Because of me. I'm the one that made it shitty." Furthermore, some men claimed that it was merely "luck" that distinguished them from the persistent offenders we present in Chapter 7.

For the men who have desisted from crime, one is struck by the pride they have in their accomplishments and material effects. They are proud of their cars, homes, and possessions such as large-screen TVs and VCRs. Simple, material things are important to them because they did not have material goods in their youth.⁵ They were bitten and bitten hard by growing up during the Great Depression in poor, disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston. They are rightfully proud of what they have now. Michael captured this sense of accomplishment most vividly:

What I done here is a success story. I have no education whatsoever. I have no grammar school. No high school. No nothing . . . In plain English I done all the shit jobs, because I had no education . . . My life now is

beautiful. Raised five kids. No education. Worked every day in my life. Whenever I lost one job, I got another. No, I think I done pretty goddamn good.

David echoed this sentiment—"I'd say I had a goddamn good life. Goddamn good. I'm 67 years old now. I'm in pretty good shape. I think I've got a few more years. When I was young I never thought I'd have this age. I think I'm doing pretty good. I've got nice kids, nice wife, can't ask better than that."

Combined with their pride in their possessions and accomplishments, the men who desisted also exhibited generativity (McAdams and St. Aubin 1992). They have worked and are working to make things better for the next generation. The most dramatic evidence is a man and his wife who have taken foster children from state hospitals into their home for many years. Several of the men we talked to have adopted children from teenage mothers. Illustrating the theme of generativity concretely to us, one man we interviewed insisted we send his payment to a local charity in the neighborhood in which he grew up.

The men worry about the apparent lack of generativity in the current generation. For example, Victor deplored young people's failure to take responsibility.

That's the way I look at it—we've gotten away from everything . . . all these people gave something to the country. . . . You never saw their kids, and it was always working for their kids. And their kids in turn worked so that their kids could be a little better. After that the whole thing started to change. I see like the passing of the box at church Sunday. A bunch of these goons—three of them in the last row. I tell Father [name]: "Why don't you take them and put them down in front?" Comes the time to pass the box under their nose. Out of those three rows, if I get 15 cents, I'm lucky. How the frick is the church going to survive in the future? But, if there is a basketball game, World Series, or baseball game, or rock concert, baby, they can come up with 30 or 45 bucks for a ticket.

In a similar vein, Leon and his wife pointed out the differences between growing up during the Great Depression and today. Leon's wife stated:

We lived paycheck to paycheck practically until we retired. All our lives, I've always had to worry about money. There's never been enough of it,

but we managed to buy a home, several homes, and buy and sell them, and go up the ladder a little bit more each time. But I think that most parents of our generation were far too generous with their children, and I don't think it gave them the work incentive that our generation had. I think we took that away from them, and I think that's a sad thing. I think things come much too easy to my children's generation. It's much too easy for them to get themselves into debt. We couldn't have got ourselves into debt. They didn't have charge cards that I know of in our day, so if we wanted something, we had to save up for it. Or get it on time and have somebody co-sign for us or something, you know.

Whether these views represent normative generational conflict or a real change is not known.

What Have We Learned?

Why do some offenders stop offending? It appears that offenders desist as a result of a combination of individual actions (choice) in conjunction with situational contexts and structural influences linked to important institutions that help sustain desistance. This fundamental theme underscores the need to examine both individual motivation and the social context in which individuals are embedded. The processes of desistance operate simultaneously at different levels (individual, situational, and community) and across different contextual environments (family, work, and military). The process of desistance is more than mere aging or "maturational reform" (Matza 1964), and we believe that life-history narratives are useful for unpacking complex person-environment interactions.

Overall it appears that successful cessation from crime occurs when the proximate causes of crime are affected. A central element in the desistance process is the "knifing off" of individual offenders from their immediate environment and offering them a new script for the future (Caspi and Moffitt, 1995). Institutions like the military and reform school have this knifing-off potential, as does marriage, although the knifing-off effect of marriage may not be as dramatic. Another component in the desistance process is the "structured role stability" that emerges across various life domains (for example, marriage, work, residence). The men who desisted from crime shared a daily routine that provided both structure and meaningful activity. The structure was fully embraced by the men, and one result was a

disassociation from delinquent peers in adulthood, a major factor in explaining their desistance from crime (see Graham and Bowling 1995; Warr 1998). As discussed in Chapter 3, marriage can change routine activities, especially regarding one's peer group. Wives, for example, may limit the number of nights men can "hang with the guys," so that marriage has the potential to cut off an ex-offender from his delinquent peer group (see Warr 1998, 2002).

This idea is consistent with research on social stratification: successful mobility is a cultural change involving new opportunities and a willingness and ability to accept them. For example, Gans (1962, 254) found that people from the West End of Boston who moved into the middle class had to first break, or have broken for them, their dependence on family and peers. That is, those who strove to get ahead had to shift from peer-group goals to object goals, such as a career, prestige, wealth, or individual development (see Whyte 1993 for a similar discussion of peer groups in Boston's North End).

The routine activities of work and family life and associated informal connections serve two functions. One is to provide social support (Cullen 1994) or emotional "attachment" (Hirschi 1969). The other function is one of monitoring and control through the provision of a set of activities and obligations that are often repeated each day. Many habits are mundane, but they nonetheless give structure to one's time and restrict opportunities for crime. Moreover, these activities result from shifts in role expectations that are not fully explained by age (Osgood and Lee 1993).

What is especially notable in the desistance process is personal agency. A vital feature that emerged from our qualitative data is that personal conceptions about the past and future are apparently transformed as men maneuver through the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The men engage in what can be called "transformative action." Although informed by the past, agency is also oriented toward the future (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Cohler 1982; Maruna 2001). Projective actions in the transition from adolescence to adulthood advance a new sense of self and a new identity as a desister from crime or, more aptly, as a family man, hard worker, and good provider. As a result the men we studied were active participants in the decision to give up crime. Thus both objective and subjective contingencies are important in the desistance process (see Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Maruna 2001; Shover 1996).

As we observed in our life-history narratives, the men who desisted from crime seem to have acquired a degree of maturity by taking on family and work responsibilities. They forged new commitments, made a fresh start, and found new direction and meaning in life. These commitments were not necessarily made consciously or deliberately, but rather were "by default"—the result of "side bets" (Becker 1960, 38). The men made a commitment to go straight without even realizing it. Before they knew it, they had invested so much in a marriage or a job that they did not want to risk losing their investment (Becker 1960; see also Toby 1957, Hirschi 1969). Involvement in these institutions—work and marriage—reorders short-term situational inducements to crime and, over time, redirects long-term commitments to conformity (Becker 1964; Briar and Piliavin 1965).

It seems that some, but by no means all, men who desisted changed their identity as well, and this in turn affected their outlook and sense of maturity and responsibility (see Maruna 2001). From our life-history narratives, for example, we sense that certain roles and certain behavior are seen as "age inappropriate" (Shover 1996). One former delinquent linked the role of "party boy" to being young and single. In response to the question, "What about your marriage? Has that changed you?" Richard replied with a hearty laugh, "Oh yeah. I mean that's when you really had to settle down." He continued, "Especially when [my oldest son] came." Remaining a delinquent or a party boy or a hell-raiser would signify a state of "arrested development" and be incompatible with adult status (see Gove 1985, 129). This notion is consistent with Hill (1971), who discusses changes in identity over the life cycle as one moves from "a hell-raiser to a family man."

We are by no means claiming an absence of regret in the process of desistance. In his study of the transformation from being a hell-raiser, Hill presented evidence of the ambivalence that men feel regarding their new role and identity as "family men" (1971). This is not surprising because, as Smelser (1998, 8) pointed out, bonded relations are fused with ambivalence—dependence, even when welcomed, "entails a certain entrapment." For example, William told us that if he were not married he would be "wandering" around. He said ruefully, "There's many times I wanted to go back to Alaska to see what it was like now. But we can't do that. We're hoping to go to Disney next March." We heard many such bittersweet remembrances of deviant lives left behind—of exciting moments given up.⁶

The lessons we learned about desistance from our narratives are consistent with the research literature on drug and alcohol relapse. In a study of one hundred hospital-treated heroin addicts and one hundred hospital-treated alcohol-dependent individuals, Vaillant (1988) found that external interventions that restructure a drug addict's or alcoholic's life in the community were often associated with sustained abstinence. The main factors are: (1) compulsory supervision; (2) finding a substitute dependence to compete with drug or alcohol consumption; (3) obtaining new social supports; and (4) membership in an inspirational group and discovery of a sustained source of hope and inspiration (see also Vaillant and Milofsky 1982). Culling the recent literature on treatment, especially from Canada, produces some hopeful signs that offenders can be rehabilitated when proximate causes of crime are targeted. Programs that address dynamic attributes of offenders and their circumstances (for example, antisocial attitudes, involvement with delinquent peers, and employment status) that can change during and after the treatment process appear to be more successful than programs that focus on static factors or background characteristics (Andrews and Bonta 1994; Bonta 1996; Gendreau, Cullen, and Bonta 1994).

What is also striking from our life histories is that there appear to be no major differences in the process of desistance for nonviolent and violent juvenile offenders. Despite contrary expectations put forward by many criminological theories, this finding is consistent with empirical research showing that violent offenders have the same background characteristics as frequent but nonviolent offenders (Farrington 1991; Capaldi and Patterson 1996; Piquero 2000). In fact, Farrington concluded that "the causes of aggression and violence must be essentially the same as the causes of persistent and extreme antisocial, delinquent, and criminal behavior" (1991, 25). Our narratives reveal that the processes of desistance across a wide variety of crime types are very similar.

Overall, then, while there are multiple pathways to desistance, there do appear to be some important general processes or mechanisms of desistance at work. We have found four major self-described turning points implicated in the desistance process: marriage/spouses, the military, reform school, and neighborhood change. Each of these creates new situations that (1) knife off the past from the present; (2) provide not only supervision and monitoring but opportunities for

social support and growth; (3) bring change and structure to routine activities; and (4) provide an opportunity for identity transformation. Although some offenders may seek to "make good" (Maruna 2001) or engage in "up-front work" to better their lives (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002), we believe that most offenders desist in response to structurally induced turning points that serve as the catalyst for sustaining long-term behavioral change. As Becker noted a long time ago,

A structural explanation of personal change has implications for attempts to deliberately mold human behavior. In particular, it suggests that we need not try to develop deep and lasting interests, be they values or personality traits, in order to produce the behavior we want. It is enough to create situations which will coerce people into behaving as we want them to and then to create the conditions under which other rewards will become linked to continuing this behavior. (1964, 52-53; see also Becker 1960)