Northumbria Research Link

Exploring how employment schemes for young offenders aid desistance from crime

Criminological literature investigating the association between employment and desistance presents largely mixed findings (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Piquero, MacDonald, and Parker, 2002; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Wright and Cullen, 2004; Savolainen, 2009). Despite this, 'employment programmes' providing work opportunities for offenders are becoming more popular, both in prisons and in the community. For example, the Skill Mill social enterprise is set to double its number of sites in the UK and consequently hundreds of young people will be involved in the scheme (The Skill Mill, 2019). This employment programme provides six months paid work for youths who have been involved with the Youth Offending Team (YOT). The purpose of the Skill Mill is not to act as an alternative to conventional methods of justice, but rather it is to give youths an opportunity to rebuild their lives and reduce their chances of resuming offending. Indeed, the Skill Mill has been found to reduce reoffending (Long et al., 2019). It is therefore important to gain a greater understanding of how such schemes aid desistance. This paper uses the Skill Mill as a case study to examine the rationale for employment programmes, the dynamics of involvement and the potential benefits for the participants.

Employment and desistance

Numerous scholars assert that desistance constitutes a fluid process of abstaining from crime over time, rather than a precise status after a circumscribed period of non-offending (Fagan, 1989; Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Farrall, 2004; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). This reflects how offenders themselves describe their desistance - as an on-going struggle, with setbacks and relapses, rather than an instantaneous transition from offender to non-offender (Halsey, Armstrong and Wright, 2017). This study also considers desistance to be a process. Using this definition was vital when interpreting the findings.

Scholarship indicates that employment is associated with reduced criminal activities. Sampson and Laub (1993) describe how forming bonds with co-workers generates certain benefits for the individual – known as social capital. Engagement in criminal activity would likely lead to ostracism from co-workers and jeopardise these. Thus, controlling criminal behaviours is necessary to preserve social capital. Similarly, Ezell and Cohen (2005) and Farrall (2012) confirmed that employment influenced offenders' social capital, to encourage the avoidance of criminal acts. Moreover, Wright

and Cullen (2004) report that engaging in employment can promote desistance because bonds with 'pro-social' co-workers disrupt previously established delinquent peer networks. Indeed this link between employment and desistance appears to exist regardless of the seriousness of the prior offences committed. For example, MacKenzie and De Li (2002) studied a sample of offenders who received community sentences and found that those who engaged in employment had lower rates of reoffending, while Savolainen (2009) also discovered a relationship between employment and a reduction in the rate of new convictions using a sample of high-risk offenders released from prison.

Can we conclude from the above studies that employment *produces* desistance? It would appear not, as others have found that employment has no impact upon desistance (see for example Rand, 1987; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Piquero, MacDonald, and Parker, 2002; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002). In particular, employment 'programmes' for offenders appear to produce inconsistent results in terms of desistance. Wilson, Gallagher and MacKenize (2000) conducted a meta-analysis which evaluated 33 educational, vocational or work programmes for offenders. Overall, they found large heterogeneity in effects across programs suggesting that some were highly effective, whereas others had no effect on future offending behaviour. Visher, Winterfield, and Coggeshall (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of US non-custodial employment programs for individuals with a criminal history. Despite 6000 offenders having participated in such schemes, the analysis showed very few work programs had a causal impact on re-arrest.

Some UK employment programs fare slightly better. Programmes such as Aspire, Blue Sky, Cleanstart, Landworks and the focus of this study - the Skill Mill - provide employment for offenders in diverse areas such as gardening, painting and decorating, house clearance and creative work. Various evaluations have demonstrated that these programs had a positive impact upon desistance (Aspire, 2017; Ministry of Justice, 2013; Baker, 2014; Landworks, 2018; Long et al., 2019). There are also numerous programmes that do not provide employment/training opportunities, but rather assist and support offenders to obtain full-time employment. For example, St Giles Trust helps offenders to overcome personal barriers and access employment opportunities. It reports a reoffending rate of 19%, considerably less than the national average (Davies et al., 2016).

Shover (1996: 127) suggests that 'not all types of employment are equally likely to moderate offenders' criminal involvement'. Indeed, Uggen (1999) found that those given low-quality jobs (characterised by skill level and industry) were no more likely to desist than a control group who were unemployed. Participants selected into high-quality jobs (characterised by skill level and industry) however, reduced their criminal behaviours. Similarly, Van der Geest, Bijleveld, and Blokland (2011) report that the strength of the association between employment and desistance depends upon

employment quality (measured as regular work with long-term prospects as opposed to temporary work). Likewise, Uggen, Piliavin and Matsueda (1997) discuss how work programmes for offenders should provide adequate income so that legitimate, as opposed to non-legitimate work presents the greatest net benefit. Well-paid work opportunities prevent offenders from resorting to illegitimate means to achieve status within society.

This requirement for work to be 'high-quality' may help explain the rather inconsistent findings in the employment and desistance research. Overall, it appears that the relationship between employment and crime is complex and requires further investigation. This paper uses the Skill Mill social enterprise as a case study to enhance our understanding of how employment programmes can promote desistance. At the Skill Mill, participants engage in paid outdoor work for approximately 30 hours per week. Examples of the type of work include fencing, vegetation management, waste removal from rivers, allotment clearances, litter-picking and tree/flower planting. Attendees of the programme work in small groups – a maximum of five employees and the supervisor. The Skill Mill provides considerably more individual support and is not as demanding as usual full-time employment. Thus, the programme functions as a transitional step, helping individuals who have often been excluded from school for a number of years and who struggled to maintain a place on subsequent education, training or work programs, get attuned to working and having a more structured day again.

Methods

This paper is based on data collected for a three-year PhD project involving employees (n=23) and supervisors (n=4), drawn from the Tellville, Landington and Wheatburgh[1] Skill Mill sites. Access to this sample was gained through the Skill Mill social enterprise, who acted as a gatekeeper. All the employees had committed multiple offences prior to engaging in the Skill Mill, the average was 12. The most common offences on their records were criminal damage, burglary, common assault and shoplifting – the Youth Justice Board grades these as mid-serious offences.

A mixture of participant observations and interviews were used to explore participants' engagement in the employment programme. Spending time immersed in the working environments of these young people also allowed me to build trust with participants, which resulted in the collection of richer data in interviews. Semi-structured interviews were held with employees on their first week,

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[1] Names of cities have been changed to ensure confidentiality of supervisors and young people

three months in, six months in and six months after their involvement in the Skill Mill programme. Semi-structured interviews were also held with supervisors. Furthermore, a document analysis of employees' YOT records was conducted. These contained young people's official offending records, their Asset assessment by YOT caseworkers, police reports and court documents.

Interview transcripts, field notes and notes from the document analysis were analysed thematically. Firstly, coding was based on sensitising categories: those related to the research aims and existing literature. Secondly, lower-level codes based on emerging (inductive) categories were created. The aim of this study was to explore openly the dynamics of young people's involvement and the potential benefits of employment schemes. Therefore it was necessary to generate conclusions directly from the data. However, what themes were considered important was based upon their relevance to the research aims. Thus, Thomas's (2006) 'general inductive approach' was utilised rather than Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory.

The project was approved by the University Ethics Committee. Conducting observations and interviews with young people, most of whom had long been disengaged from school, presented a potential ethical issue. They may have been less able to comprehend the nature of the research and the risks of participating (Caulfield and Hill, 2014). I mitigated this by designing user-friendly information sheets for young people and I spent time explaining the nature of the project to participants. I also gained the consent of a parent/guardian for under-18s to participate.

Findings

The aspects of the employment scheme that participants and supervisors described influencing desistance encompass the work role, the co-workers and the extrinsic benefits from working. These shall be considered in turn.

The work role

Much of the work at the Skill Mill benefitted local communities. For example, when young people were involved in waterway clearance, this was beneficial to people living near these waterways, as it improved the aesthetic appeal of the area, prevented blockages and averted flooding. The community had a positive response to young people carrying out this work. Frequently passers-by complimented employees; many thanked them for doing work that had long been required in the community, which no one else was willing to do.

Participants particularly valued engaging in work that other people would be able to see and appreciate. For example, Julie[2] described -

> 'You are actually doing something that people realise. Like when we were literally like just taking like plastic tree guards off the trees we were just like aww no one's going to know that we've done this… and like five passerby's were like aww you's are doing a fantastic job and the neighbourhood actually realises what you are doing and they appreciate it.'

Similarly, John explained -

> 'It's making it a better place isn't it? When we done the fencing all the fences were like broken down and that and by the end it was spotless … Everyone was telling weh we were doing a good job. It was worth our time doing that job…with all the thanks and that we were getting and that it felt good to actually be doing something'

The positive feedback employees received from others added to their sense that their work made a real difference and was purposeful, especially for young people who were used to the negative reactions of others in their communities because of their anti-social behaviour. As a supervisor reported –

> 'Most of them thrive off of praise. Some of them have never been praised… more often than not they are told they're a waste of space'

Participants were used to receiving mainly negative feedback from others – such as family members, schoolteachers, criminal justice workers and social workers - regarding themselves and their abilities. Engaging in work that allowed others to see their value and potential was therefore very meaningful to young people.

Employees felt that the work they participated in changed the public's opinions of them, as Joseph explained –

> 'Everyone in that neighbourhood thinks I'm a little bastard, because - to be fair - I was, but now they are glad I'm working. They all recognise me, you nah, and they say you're doing good. I was like - fucking hell. Nice to hear though innit?'

McNeill and Maruna (2008) describe 'hyper-moralism' being required on the part of ex-offenders in order for community members to view them as anything other than deviants. Performing environmental work in the community may be this necessary hyper-conforming moral role. Skill Mill attendees were not only 'getting a job', they were observable in the community doing work that benefits society. Moreover, some of the work at the Skill Mill involved cleaning up the crimes of others, such as cleaning graffiti, removing fly-tipped items and repairing the damage done by vandals. This

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[2] All participants' names replaced with pseudonyms.

especially symbolised to the public that these young people were reformed offenders, who were making good to the community for the harms done to it.

Thus, engagement in work that visibly helped local communities allowed employees to display to others that they could do good for the community, rather than harm. In turn, the positive appraisal by the public reemphasised the change in behaviour to employees. Maruna (2001) established that reconfiguration from a deviant to a pro-social identity is important to sustain desistance. Drawing upon the tenets of symbolic interactionism, Maruna et al. (2004) explain how positive recognition by others can aid pro-social identity formation. At the Skill Mill, seeing their changed mind-set reflected back to them in the eyes of the public aided young people's configuration of a pro-social identity. Thus, the nature of the work undertaken assisted the formation of a desistance-sustaining identity.

However, some of the Skill Mill work was similar to what offenders would typically undertake for community sentences. Participants described that when carrying out community reparations, there could be a negative reaction from the public. Thus, it must be acknowledged that a contributing factor that made young people feel that their work changed the public's opinions of them, was the effort the Skill Mill made to 're-label' young people as employees, rather than offenders. For example, the van they travelled to work in and all their clothing, was branded with the Skill Mill logo. This ensured that passersby would know that these young people were working for a company, rather than doing community service.

The co-workers

At the Skill Mill, young people worked in groups of between three and five employees. All were aged 16-18, with a history of offending. They worked together every weekday with a single supervisor over a period of six months. This particular arrangement had implications for desistance.

Pro-social role models

Each employee I surveyed was at varying stages of the desistance process, as levels of commitment to change and outside circumstances (such as family situations, living arrangements, peer groups etc.) naturally differed between individuals. An implication of this was that those who had assumed a non-offending identity, and thus were at what Maruna and Farrall (2004) label the secondary stage of desistance, could act as positive role models for those primary desisters that were still at the outset of their journey towards change.

For example, William had not reoffended for almost a year prior to commencing the work programme. He denounced his offending as 'a mistake from the past that I've moved on from' and was reluctant to discuss it; he did not see himself as an offender anymore. The supervisor used William

to improve behaviour in the group, as he explained when we were discussing delinquency at the Skill Mill –

> 'So William - for example - is a very big, capable young man, and that bit more mature than the others, so I encourage him to take more of a leadership role to try and tear down that kind of behaviour'.

William encouraged the other cohort members - Joseph and Darrell - to go drinking with him at the weekends. Whilst this might appear to be an example of negative peer influence, these young people were close to being 18-years-old and this is arguably a conventional activity for this age group. Indeed, for Darrell, this was a far more pro-social group than his friends outside who he described riding motorbikes (likely illegally) and using cannabis, mephedrone and ecstasy in their spare time. Likewise, Joseph's outside peer group both dealt and used drugs. In particular, Joseph had respect for William, and saw him as a positive role model –

> 'you can just speak to him about 'owt… he is not the kind of person that would cut you off, he'll sit there and he'll talk… his family chucked him out cos he was getting in trouble, but then he just packed all that in, just like that, and now he does boxing and he's getting into apprenticeships and just generally getting his shit together'

The group dynamics in this cohort had a positive result, as by six months after completing the placement, neither William nor Joseph had reoffended. Darrell committed only one offence in this period and this was significantly less serious than his previous offences. The supervisor confirmed that he believed William might have influenced the others to 'not get back into offending, because they still go out, socially and all that'.

However, employment schemes involving offenders working together may not always be productive for desistance. Not only can there be pro-social role models, but anti-social ones too. As Greg stated –

> 'Whether the Skill Mill works or not depends on the group… if you've got the wrong mix it's not going to work at all… because if one kicks off, then if you've got a bad group they will all start kicking off'.

He also gave an example–

> 'If one's selling drugs and the other wants the drugs it [the Skill Mill group] can be a bad thing. In a previous cohort that happened, one young person was a bad apple and the others started slipping'.

To avoid this escalation of delinquent and criminal behaviour, supervisors made an effort to choose the correct combination of employees for each cohort, so that there were positive influences present within the group. They also tried to manipulate the working environment so that those young people who were further along the desistance process took the role of leader.

Supervisors also functioned as pro-social role models. Supervisors found that humour and a degree of permissiveness of some minor deviant behaviours allowed them to win the respect of young people. Consequently, some employees described the supervisor as their 'pal' because of the 'banter' he brought to the group. As Alexander stated of the Telville supervisor -

'He's mad, he's ace. I like him me, we all do. He's a good laugh…we can joke around with him like you would with mates'

In some instances supervisors admitted to employees that they too had been deviant in their youth, but had chosen a different path to success in adulthood. The relationship built with supervisors allowed him to appear as a credible role model to young people; through his work at the Skill Mill, he demonstrated a different lifestyle they could choose.

Supervisors described employees improving their social skills from observing their example. As Greg expressed – 'they learn their please and thankyou's and don't litter and don't spit and its simple little things'. Furthermore, in Telville, the supervisor took the young people to employment fairs and open days, so that they could observe how he interacted with adult professionals and practice speaking to such individuals themselves. As Ross stated –

'I said … we are going to the job fair, you know and – not holding their hand – but going down there with them and you know talking. And them seeing how I engage with adults and training services and jobs and stuff like that. They were quite clearly nervous but then, you know, within five minutes once they'd seen me done a few initial conversations… we were down there for like an hour and a half, they chatted to loads of colleges loads of people.'

Thus, because the supervisor was relatable to employees, they respected him and were willing to accept his help and follow his example. He presented a possible 'future self' for young people. Indeed some young people described wishing to do the supervisor's job in the future.

Support for change

At the Skill Mill, employees worked in small groups with individuals of a similar age and history of YOT involvement. Most of the work required employees to work as a team. Consequently, the organisation of this enterprise made friendships between employees likely. Scott's statement illustrated this -

'The best thing about the Skill Mill in my opinion is that it is a small group so you get to know the people you are working with if you know what I mean? You get to know them for who they are rather than just like… working with a lot of people but not even knowing their names. I worked with Dean, Ross and Alexander like for… I'd say we are quite close now, we're quite close.'

Joseph described how his friendships with the other employees supported him to stop reoffending –

'It's being around people… It's like when I weren't on it and I were hanging around with my mates I were starting to like realise and obviously I started to want to change myself and change

my ways, but they weren't seeing it from that point of view. They were like – "oh you won't get caught, do this, do that". It were just like being around people who were realising like obviously it's stupid and they want to change themselves and they actually want a decent life. It's obviously like we both - well all three of us - want to do the exact same thing, so it's just like… being around them.'

Whilst his co-workers may be still in a process of change, they all want the 'same thing': to have a 'worker' rather than an offending identity. By observing this, it reiterates to Joseph that his own self-transformation is worthwhile and possible.

Such were the strength of the bonds generated between employees that they acted as a control over their behaviours to a certain extent. As a supervisor detailed, when I asked him how the Skill Mill helped young people stop offending -

'I think it's also the almost camaraderie they build with the other young people, and with me. Its serious and its work, but it's also good fun… there comes a point where they almost get that fear of missing out, where they don't want to miss a day because they might miss something fun or we might have a really good laugh'

The social goods generated from bonds with their co-workers motivated young people to keep attending the scheme.

The support co-workers provided also allowed young people to distance themselves from negative influences. Many underwent a move in peer groups during their time at the Skill Mill. For example, Joseph described -

'I've worked up to slowly cutting them off and just like fucking off my own way…outside [the Skill Mill] I don't really bother with anyone anymore because I always seem to get myself in fucking shit'.

Furthermore, Glenn explained -

'I dinnay get locked up with these ones. These are more the friends that you would want to socialise with more. Now I've got these pals I can keep away from them and I dinnay get in trouble any more'

Resonating with Shapland and Bottoms' (2011) 'diachronic self-control', Glenn acknowledged that the Skill Mill youths were less likely to lead him into more offending and so actively altered who he socialised with to aid his desistance. This defied the supervisor's expectations; he was certain that Glenn would reoffend with his best friend who had been released from prison. Yet, his friendships with his co-workers Kevin and John led to a distance with these more actively criminal peers. Kevin also underwent a move in peer groups, he explained needing to cut off outside friends because 'a was just getting into trouble all the time'. He described his 'real friendship' with John helping him to do this.

Supervisors also provided support for change. Supervisors often assisted employees with issues they had outside their work at the Skill Mill. As Julie described –

'Like within the six month Greg's done a lot for me… he's helped out a lot. And like I am really grateful for that. He's helped out a lot with my driving... he's helped with like my tenancy and stuff'

I observed supervisors helping employees to find extra-curricular activities, secure a tenancy, travel to job interviews, find and attend relevant support programmes and deal with negative peer pressure. This support provided by the supervisor was very important as young people experienced numerous issues that made desistance and attaining work more difficult. As supervisor Ross explained –

'They can't just go out and get a job for many reasons, one is they need to have some support. And also applying for jobs, it's scary going for job interviews, when you are a well-adapted young person who's had a lot of, you know, support in their life. But if you come from some of the backgrounds these young people have got, and you know even filling a job application form in, you know, some of the young people have not been in school for two or three years, its daunting, its terrifying... so…the fact that we can offer them that extra support, I think is really helpful'

Thus, the advantage of the Skill Mill employing a small group of employees at a time was that supervisors could assist young people with the individual issues they had, that may otherwise have hindered their journey towards change.

The extrinsic benefits

Therefore, the intrinsic benefits of working – having a meaningful work role and the social relationships formed – appear to influence desistance. The extrinsic benefits of employment at the Skill Mill may seem negligible, as the scheme only paid employees minimum wage. Yet, most participants were living with parents or other relatives whilst working at the Skill Mill. For young people with few living costs to pay, earning minimum wage for 30 hours a week amounted to them having a considerable disposable income. There were also few other legitimate means by which young people could ascertain this. As most were under-18, they were not eligible for welfare support. Moreover, their distance from the labour market was considerable. Having a criminal record and few qualifications present a serious barrier to gaining legitimate employment (Winlow and Hall, 2009; Standing, 2011; House of Commons Justice Committee, 2017).

Participants described earning money through working giving them a 'provider' status, which was something that they valued considerably. Young males expressed being able to afford to take their girlfriends to nice places and one young man used his earnings from the Skill Mill to buy presents for his siblings. The value of being a 'provider', even if only for oneself, appeared to be strong for both

young males and females[3], as Julie describes when I asked her what had motivated her to keep working at the Skill Mill –

> 'Like it's the fact of like … you're working for your own money… like before I had started I was just like waiting for the money off my social worker. I felt like a proper tramp. Now I can hold me head up because I'm providing for me-self'

Employees were only paid for the days that they worked at the scheme. This to a certain extent functioned as control over their offending behaviours. It motivated young people to remain in the scheme and not reoffend. As Sam expressed -

> 'When you've got a job it's pointless going out and getting in trouble cos you'll just lose your job, won't you and then you'll not have any money'

Earning money legitimately also rendered illegal activities less necessary. As a supervisor stated – 'they've got money coming in, they don't need to go out and steal stuff or deal drugs'. Furthermore earning a wage also changed young people's leisure activities. As Kyle's supervisor described –

> 'Aye, Kyle's pulled himself through. Cos obviously now he's getting paid, he's not hanging around the streets, he's going out for a pint on a Friday night up the town with his friends. Which I praised him for, rather than just standing around drinking on the streets, getting in trouble, you naw?'

At the weekend, Skill Mill employees could afford to drink in a bar/pub with other friends who were also working during the week. Whilst research has shown that the night time economy in England is a criminogenic environment (Winlow and Hall, 2006; Day, Gough and McFadden, 2003; Hobbs et al., 2005), arguably it is a far more regulated one – by bouncers, bartenders and a routine police presence - than the 'streets' or local areas in which unemployed youths would congregate. The income from working at the Skill Mill meant that employees could afford to re-engage with society and socialise in regulated spaces.

However, whilst there were many positive effects of receiving remuneration, there was also some evidence of a negative impact. The Wheatburgh supervisor explained -

> 'I think possibly one of the biggest things is obviously if they've been used to having money in their pocket. Once the money is gone that they've been getting from Skill Mill then the natural way some of them would think is that well I need some money. And then obviously they might go about it in the wrong way'

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[3] However, the sample of females was so small (n=1) that I could not determine whether being a provider was equally meaningful to both young male and female offenders. Future research could explore this further.

This is a disadvantage of employment schemes that provide remuneration. During the scheme, participants get accustomed to the fuller life that having an income allows them to have. When they leave, if they are unable to enter paid employment straight away, they might resort to illegitimate means to pursue the same lifestyle.

Discussion

Overall, this study suggests that a certain 'type' of work is required for desistance, supporting the assertions of scholars (Shover, 1996; Uggen, 1999; Van der Geest, Bijleveld and Blokland, 2011). However, this may not correspond with these researchers' criteria for 'quality' work. Whilst employees and supervisors at the Skill Mill reported that the work role, the relationships between co-workers and the remuneration from employment aided desistance, there was also evidence that these aspects could inhibit desistance. Thus, predicting whether an employment programme for offenders will aid desistance is difficult.

For instance, engaging in work that benefitted the community was meaningful to employees and the positive reactions of the public aided their pro-social identity construction. However, had this social enterprise not made an effort to 'rebrand' young people as non-offenders, doing visible work in the community may have been detrimental to the self-concepts of participants. Participants described negative reactions of community members who believed they were engaged in reparation work. As Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) express, the construction of a replacement pro-social self is a fragile process. Negative feedback from others is likely to upset this process and impede desistance.

Furthermore, whilst the findings indicate that working with other offenders can have a positive effect upon desistance, there was also evidence that close associations with others who have a history of criminal involvement can undermine desistance. The supervisor's acknowledgement that there have been groups of youths at the Skill Mill who have encouraged each other to get involved in criminal and delinquent activities reveals that it is possible for there to be a continuing confirmation of pro-criminal attitudes if offenders work together. Therefore, this study supports the findings of many scholars, in demonstrating that associating with other offenders can promote further criminal activity (Sutherland, 1947; Warr, 1993, Matsueda and Anderson, 1998; Weerman, 2004; Richardson and St.Vil, 2016). However, Skill Mill supervisors made an effort to choose the correct combination of employees and manipulate their working environment so that those further along the desistance process became leader. Therefore, to determine if employment schemes that involve offenders

working together will help or hinder desistance, how the internal dynamics of the work group are managed is very important.

If group dynamics are right, the findings from the Skill Mill indicate that such schemes can promote desistance by providing pro-social influences and credible role models for change. Weaver's (2013; 2016) research suggests that associating with ex-offenders can aid the desistance of offenders. This is because other offenders who have turned away from crime function as credible role models for identity change. The findings in this study indicate that this notion works at a more intricate level. In some of the cohorts I observed, those perceived to be further along the desistance process inadvertently gave integrity to primary desisters' imagined version of themselves changed. Secondary desisters functioned as a real-life example of a possible future self, and thus encouraged those who had made initial forays towards desistance (by getting involved in an employment programme for instance) to continue with this process. Peers of the same age and background are arguably the most suitable 'credible person'. This demonstrates how employment schemes that bring individuals with a history of criminal justice involvement together can aid the desistance process.

Another important finding that emerged when scrutinising the relationships between co-workers at the Skill Mill is that the binary statuses of 'deviant/pro-social' or 'offender/non-offender' create an unrealistic dichotomisation that does not take into account the complexity of individuals' perceptions. To illustrate, for Darrell, being part of a group that engaged in underage drinking, was for him a far more pro-social group than the violent gang he had been a member of prior to Skill Mill employment. Resonating with labelling theory (Becker, 1963), we each decide who (relative to ourselves) we wish to attach deviant labels to. This can explain why those who are just one step further along the desistance process – a relative 'pro-social' individual – can be role models for change. This also demonstrates how important it is to conceptualise desistance as a process and not as an instantaneous transformation from offender to non-offender. Only then can the value of bringing together offenders at different stages of desistance be understood.

The findings also indicate that working with other youths with a history of criminal justice involvement can aid the desistance process by providing replacement peer groups. These allow individuals to distance themselves from 'relative' negative influences. Reduced contact with deviant peers naturally decreases their criminogenic effects and aids desistance. These replacement peer groups also provide support for change and reduce feelings of social isolation. This is important as a series of studies describe how desistance can be a lonely existence (Nugent, 2015; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Richardson and St.Vil, 2016).

Moreover, in some instances, the strength of the bonds between employees at the Skill Mill acted as a social control. The social goods generated from bonds with their co-workers motivated young people to keep attending the scheme, and hence to not reoffend or drop out. In addition, I observed in some cohorts positive peer pressure and some controlling of deviant behaviours to 'fit in' with the group. This adds an interesting addendum to the theories of informal social control that were outlined at the outset of this paper (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Mackenzie and De Li, 2002; Wright and Cullen, 2004). It appears that it is not only employment that provides bonds with 'pro-social' others that controls behaviour. Social control can be present in employment even when co-workers have a history of criminal involvement.

A recurring theme that emerged from the data collected for this project was the value of employees' bonds with their supervisor. Supervisors at the Skill Mill made a considerable effort to be relatable to young people and function as a positive role model. They assisted with many issues they had outside of their employment. Most young people spoke highly of their supervisor and attributed them a key role in their journey towards change. Such evidence resonates with the findings of a number of other scholars when evaluating youth justice interventions, prison release programmes and other support/work schemes for young offenders. Studies repeatedly emphasise that the relationship between the young person and their mentor/supervisor/key worker plays a pivotal role in the success of the intervention (France and Homel, 2007; Munford and Sanders, 2015; Nugent, 2015; Kirkwood, 2016; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016).

Thus, the work role and the social group at the Skill Mill could both promote and inhibit desistance. The same was true of the remuneration. Earning a legitimate income acted as a control over young people's behaviours – it encouraged them to attend the programme and not reoffend. It also made illegitimate work less attractive, reinforcing the assertions of Uggen, Piliavin and Matsueda (1997). Furthermore, having an income altered employees' leisure activities to place them in less criminogenic situations. However, whilst the findings from this study support the inferences of Shover (1996), that employment that provides an adequate income is important for desistance, they also demonstrate that if this income is then removed, this can encourage further criminal activities to maintain the same lifestyle.

Conclusion

This study has implications for those who seek to tackle youth offending through employment. The findings reveal that desistance can be supported by employment schemes that alter how youths are

perceived by others, for example through doing work with visible benefits for the community. Furthermore, employment programmes that encourage bonds between young people with a history of criminal justice involvement can be beneficial for desistance. This is particularly the case if such programmes involve individuals at different stages of the desistance process associating together in an environment controlled by a supervisor/mentor. Moreover, the findings in study emphasise the importance of the supervisors/mentors of the programme building a strong relationship with young people, to help them on their journey towards change. In addition, schemes that supply remuneration can aid desistance, providing that they can ensure attendees transition into further paid employment at the end of the scheme. However, I acknowledge that the conclusions in this paper are formed from a single case study, and therefore future research should explore if they are relevant to other employment schemes. The extent to which these conclusions apply to different types of offenders – such as adults, females, sex offenders etc. would also be useful research.

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