

# What does “desistance” really mean? Rethinking the path to meaningful change

The word “desistance” is widely used in criminal justice contexts, often with the assumption that its meaning and implications are well understood; however, desistance from crime is a complex process that extends beyond individual efforts. A recent collaborative study<sup>†</sup> at NTU involving a diverse group of participants – including both professionals and people with lived experience of the criminal justice system – sought to explore different understandings of desistance, examining individual, professional, and societal perceptions of the concept. The results indicate that there is a distinct lack of clarity around the term, suggesting that both researchers and practitioners may need to reconsider how desistance is defined and approached.

## Background

The concept of desistance has long been central to discussions around criminal justice and rehabilitation. It is often defined as simply the cessation of criminal behaviour, tending to be treated as a straightforward outcome; however, in reality, it is a complex process influenced by numerous factors. This study brought together a mixed group of nine people, including both psychology professionals and individuals with convictions for sexual offences, to explore their perspectives on desistance. This collaborative approach sought to shed light on how desistance is understood and the challenges that people can face in navigating the process.

**“Reducing crime is an important objective, but ‘desistance’ has become a buzzword in criminal justice initiatives.”**

Because of the diversity of the experiences of those in the group, the CoNavigator tool, which is designed for interdisciplinary collaboration, was used to help ensure that everyone had an equal voice in the discussion. This system follows a staged process, starting with individual reflection by the participants. This is followed by group discussions, in which people can share

their insights while having the opportunity to challenge each other’s perspectives. Additional rounds of individual and group activities ultimately lead to the creation of a physical structure that maps key concepts and presents the perspectives of all those involved.



Sections of the CoNavigator layout that was created

## Key themes

Three key themes emerged from the CoNavigator process. First, the term “desistance” is not well defined and is often misused or misunderstood. Second, meaningful change in how desistance is understood and approached requires broader societal education. Finally, each person’s process of change may be different, and this individuality should be reflected in the support offered.

It was noted that the lack of a clear definition of desistance allows it to be shaped by implicit assumptions, often placing responsibility solely

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on the individual while ignoring social and structural barriers to change. Some also questioned whether the term itself, by framing the issue around *stopping* behaviour, inadvertently reinforces negative identities rather than supporting the construction of positive, prosocial ones.

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**“One participant observed that desistance is defined in relation to individuals already labelled as ‘offenders’.”**

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Societal stigma around those with convictions – particularly convictions for sexual offences – can complicate efforts at reintegration. This idea was linked to the general use of the word “offender” as an imposed identity; the word “desistance” also implies a constant and ongoing risk of offending, making it difficult to break free from the offender identity. For this reason, it was argued that broader societal education is needed to change the attitudes of professionals and the public, reduce stigma, and highlight that successful reintegration depends as much on community support as on personal effort.

The group noted that the needs, motivations, and circumstances of different people with different convictions will vary widely, recognising that particular offence types may require specific approaches. They stressed the importance of flexible support systems that adapt over time, rather than rigid models of rehabilitation that assume uniform progress or goals. The need to promote intrinsic motivation and personal agency was also emphasised. In particular, some of those with convictions felt that certain approaches seemed to be done *to* them rather than *with* them, describing a system focused more on control than on encouragement for personal growth.

### Implications

The points raised in the discussion indicate that there is a need to refine the understanding of desistance to avoid misconceptions and enable more effective interventions. Given the term’s ambiguity, policymakers and practitioners may

need to reflect on what constitutes meaningful change and how it should be measured. Policies must move beyond a simplistic understanding of desistance and recognise the complex, individual nature of the process.

The authors also suggest that there should be a shift in how support systems are structured. Individually tailored approaches are important, as people with convictions can vary widely in their needs, motivations, and challenges. Interventions should be adaptable to the type of offence committed and personal circumstances. This flexibility, alongside a focus on intrinsic motivation and personal agency, could encourage more sustainable change.

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**“Public safety is not achieved by disproportionately fuelling fear or ostracising people involved in the criminal justice system.”**

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Importantly, the paper concludes that there is a need for broader societal education to reduce stigma and reshape attitudes to reintegration. The group as a whole felt that desistance is not solely the responsibility of the individual, and community support plays a significant role. Public campaigns and professional training should aim to build understanding, challenge harmful stereotypes, and encourage more inclusive approaches to rehabilitation.

### Summary

- The term “desistance” lacks a clear definition and is often misunderstood.
- Broader societal education is needed to reduce stigma and improve reintegration.
- Desistance is a highly individual process, requiring tailored, person-centred support.
- Both intrinsic motivation and community support are needed for meaningful and lasting change.

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<sup>\*</sup>Winder, B., Carvalho, M., Underwood, M., Antoniadis, Z., Taylor, G., Perkins, R., Young, P., Wood, C., & Earle, D. (2025). “Don’t think about a pink elephant”: Collaboratively exploring the notion of desistance using the CoNavigator participatory tool. *Journal of Criminal Psychology*, 15(4), 432–446. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCP-11-2024-0104>

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