

Article 1

Desistance from Crime in Hong Kong: Pioneering Research on What Works



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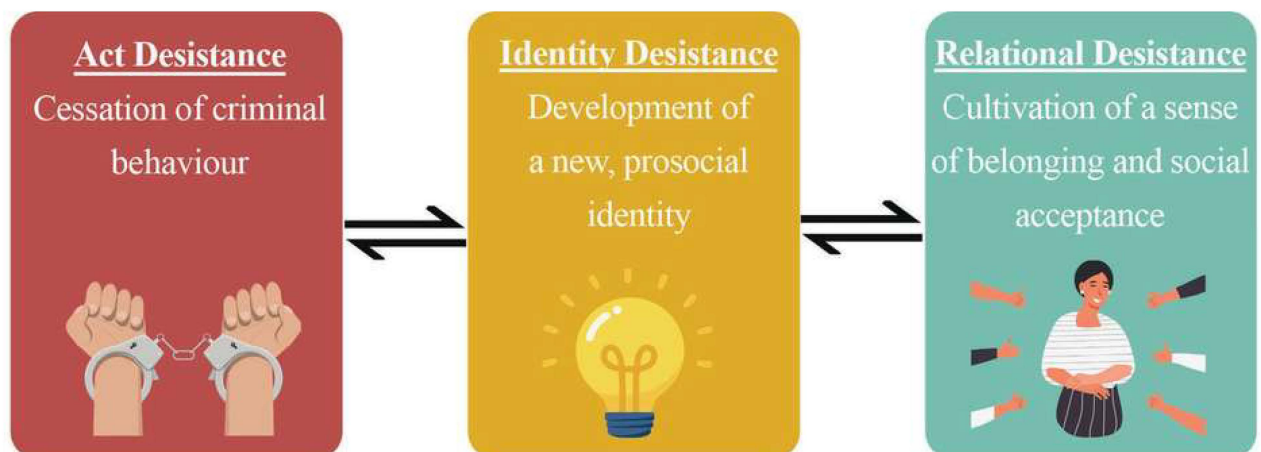
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Introduction

In a landmark initiative promoting evidence-informed rehabilitation services and policies, a pioneering study on desistance from crime in Hong Kong — conducted in collaboration with The Chinese University of Hong Kong (The CUHK) — was successfully launched and completed in July 2025. As the first comprehensive investigation of desistance within the local context, this research offers valuable insights into how individuals disengage from criminal behaviour and how correctional systems can more effectively support their reintegration into society. Desistance theory, now widely recognised as a leading framework in criminology and rehabilitation, emphasises that moving away from crime is not a single event but a dynamic, long-term process. It comprises the following three interrelated dimensions, offering an understanding of how individuals transition from offending to becoming contributing members of society:



Key Findings from the Hong Kong Study

Using a triangulated qualitative methodology — including in-depth interviews and focus groups with 60 persisters and 51 desisters — the study adopted a developmental psychopathological lens to trace the desistance journey. Several key findings are as follows:

1. Mapping the Desistance Journey. The research constructed a comprehensive narrative of the desistance process, beginning with early life vulnerabilities, progressing through offending and incarceration, and culminating in community re-entry. Notably, some individuals not only rebuilt prosocial identities but also reached a stage of generativity — mentoring others and engaging in community services as a way of giving back.



2. Incarceration as a Turning Point. Contrary to the common perception of incarceration as purely punitive, the study revealed that imprisonment can serve as a catalyst for change. When paired with structured rehabilitation programmes, incarceration offers a period for self-reflection, discipline and personal growth. It can interrupt cycles of addiction and expose the betrayal of criminal peers, thereby motivating individuals to pursue a different path.



3. Meeting the Need for Love, Affection and Belonging. The research underscored the critical role of emotional connectedness — particularly within the Chinese cultural context. Rebuilding relationships with family, romantic partners, mentors and prosocial peers emerges as a cornerstone of sustained desistance. Restored familial bonds not only provide emotional support but also reinforce accountability and a renewed commitment to a crime-free life.



4. Fulfilling the Need for Competence, Control and Autonomy. Beyond relational needs, the study highlighted the importance of psychological empowerment. Opportunities to develop skills, exercise personal agency to make choice in life fulfilment and achieve meaningful goals were found essential for maintaining long-term desistance. These elements foster a sense of purpose and self-efficacy that supports continued prosocial behaviour.

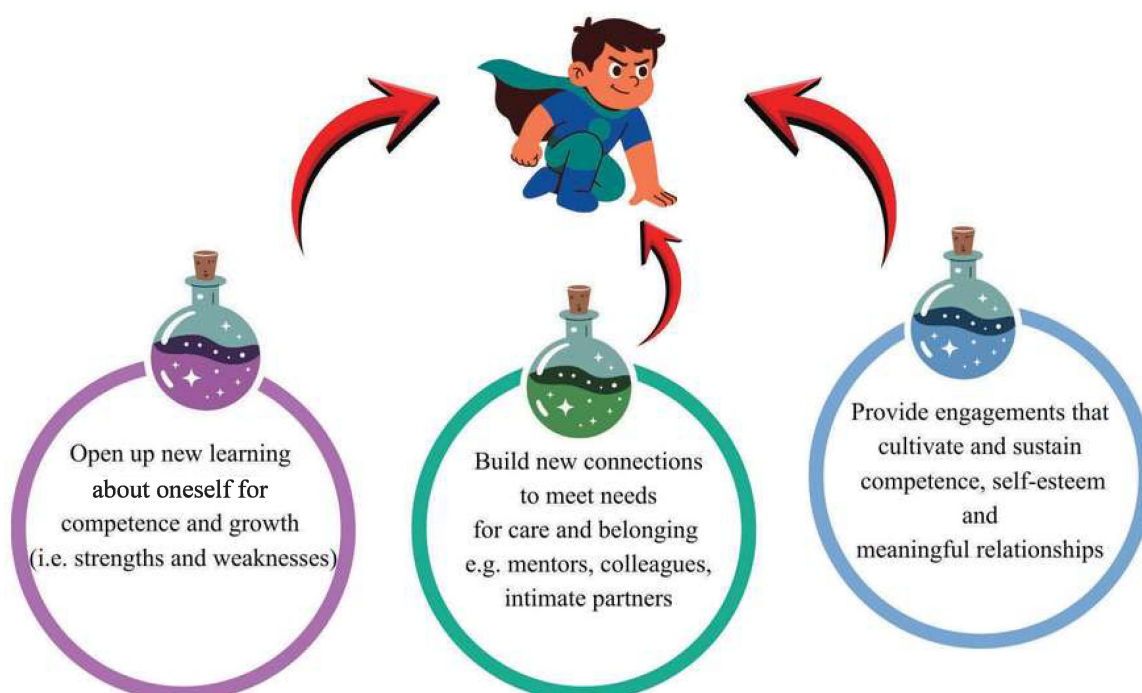




Professor Patrick LEUNG, Research Professor of The CUHK disseminated the research findings at the Professional Seminar

From Research to Practice: Catalysts for Change

To facilitate desistance and meaningful turning points, the study identified the following three broad categories of transformative experiences that correctional services can proactively consider in the provision of rehabilitation services:



Recommendations on Rehabilitation Policy

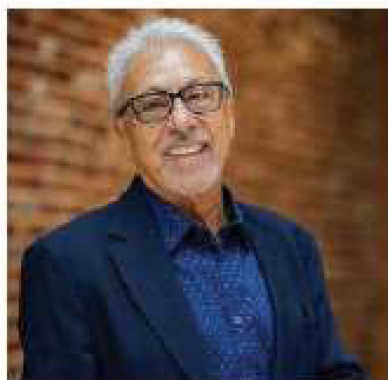
Building on these findings, the study offered several strategic recommendations to strengthen rehabilitation efforts in Hong Kong:

- 1. Adopting Strength-based Rehabilitation Strategies:** Rehabilitation should move beyond deficit-focused models and instead emphasise individuals' strengths, interests / hobbies and personal aspirations. Activities such as sports, arts and other hobbies—alongside academic learning, vocational training and spiritual exploration—can foster personal growth and meet the needs for competence and autonomy.
- 2. Strengthening the Role of Rehabilitation Facilitator:** Frontline custodial staff play a pivotal role in fostering a rehabilitative environment through supporting positive changes in daily interactions with persons in custody (PICs). Providing counseling skills training and institutional support is essential for fostering a culture where prosocial behaviour is encouraged, modelled and reinforced.
- 3. Ensuring Continuity through Throughcare Models:** Effective desistance requires seamless support from custody to community. Effective use of the five Multi-purpose Family and Rehabilitation Centres helps implement the throughcare models through offering consistent guidance, resources and opportunities for engagement among the supervisees. Supporting persons in desistance to participate in volunteering, community service and mentorship not only benefits society but also reinforces their prosocial identities and a sense of belonging.



Research Consultation Meeting with overseas and local research advisers

The Correctional Rehabilitation Research Unit held a research consultation meeting on 15 October 2025, engaging in substantive discussion on the research findings and their implications. The followings are the key highlights:



Dr Frank J. Porporino, Research Consultant

“I thought your very well executed qualitative research was able to outline an excellent and very helpful Desistance Pathway Model for Hong Kong. I can see it offering guidance for programme development for many years to come. We know that for rehabilitative services to be effective, we have to respect desistance as a *process* and support the PICs in their continued desistance journey — from Act (support in ceasing re-offending as per the Risk-Needs-Responsivity paradigm), to Identity (cultivating a new pro-social self), and ultimately to Relational Desistance (fostering a sense of belonging within society). The INCARCERATION experience should serve as a transformative opportunity for rehabilitation and positive change during which PICs begin to learn and see the benefits of adopting NEW pro-social attitudes and behaviours, while developing competencies, agency and self-esteem within a pro-social world. Prison settings that offer customised rehabilitative regimes can support the *beginning* of the desistance journeys for all PICs — regardless of gender or age. That beginning then needs to be reinforced with further support and acceptance in the community after release.”



Dr LEUNG Kin-ip, Honourary Advisor

“First, peer counselling and mentoring constitute a particularly promising avenue in desistance-oriented practice. Empirical research has demonstrated that individuals who have successfully desisted from offending can make substantive and positive contributions to society. Their sustained commitment to a law-abiding lifestyle offers a compelling model for PICs, fostering hope and reinforcing the belief that personal transformation is attainable. Owing to their shared life experiences, desisters possess a unique capacity to empathise with PICs, providing both emotional support and credible insight into the multifaceted challenges encountered across the stages of offending, sentencing, incarceration and community reintegration. Naturally, adequate preparation and structured training are prerequisites before a desister can undertake a peer counselling role. A prudent starting point would involve pairing desisters with clinical psychologists and other professional service

providers, enabling them to participate meaningfully in rehabilitation programmes while developing the requisite skills and professional boundaries.

Second, I fully concur that access to meaningful learning and development opportunities is integral to the desistance process. While not all PICs may be inclined towards academic or vocational pursuits, sport-based interventions often hold particular appeal. The integration of structured physical training into rehabilitation frameworks can be highly beneficial, as it promotes discipline, self-efficacy and a sense of mastery through pro-social engagement. Moreover, accredited sports programmes may create formal pathways for PICs to attain recognised qualifications as trainers or coaches, thereby facilitating sustainable employment prospects and social reintegration upon release.”

Professor Patrick LEUNG, Research Consultant



“The desistance journey is best understood as a gradual and long-term process of personal transformation, during which individuals move beyond offending behaviour and begin to construct new, prosocial identities. Central to this process is the fulfilment of two fundamental psychological needs: belonging, care and affection, alongside competence, control and autonomy. Importantly, desistance is not a passive experience of merely receiving support. As individuals mature, they increasingly seek opportunities to provide care, guidance and expertise to others. This shift from being recipients to becoming contributors

reflects a deeper stage of identity reconstruction, where giving back becomes as fulfilling as receiving. Meeting these psychological needs, together with basic physiological requirements, lays the foundation for addressing a core spiritual dimension: the search for meaning and purpose in life.

Correctional rehabilitation services play a pivotal role in facilitating this transition by offering structured opportunities for contribution. Engagement in activities such as volunteering in elderly care, participating in community fundraising on Flag Day, or supporting youth organisations like the Boy Scouts enables individuals to experience achievement, compassion and social recognition. Through these acts of service, persons in desistance cultivate a renewed sense of purpose while solidifying a prosocial identity and strengthening community ties.”



Insights

1. Incarceration as a Positive Turning Point

Incarceration, when paired with structured rehabilitation programmes, offers reflection, discipline and growth while disrupting addiction cycles and motivating change through disillusionment with criminal peers.

2. Sustained Desistance through Belonging and Competence

Sustained desistance involves fulfilling two core psychological needs: (1) belonging, care and affection; and (2) competence, control and autonomy - through prosocial relationships and meaningful engagement in community life.

3. Rehabilitative Security as a Catalyst for Desistance from Crime

As “rehabilitation facilitators”, frontline custodial staff foster positive change by creating safe and structured environments, building trust with persons in desistance, giving constructive feedback, supporting change and modelling prosocial behaviour.