

Article 1

From Risk to Redemption: A Literature Review on Integrating “What works” and the Desistance Model in Offender Rehabilitation



Dr Elise S.W. Hung¹, Mr W.S. LAU²

¹ Senior Clinical Psychologist, CSD

² Principal Officer, CSD

The Hong Kong Correctional Services Department (CSD) is dedicated to ensuring the safe custody and effective rehabilitation of persons in custody (PICs). Since 2006, CSD has extensively implemented the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model. Recently, academic literature has advocated for the integration of the Desistance model that examines the holistic, non-linear and socially mediated processes through which individuals cease offending (McNeill, 2014). While practitioners sometimes perceive these paradigms as competing, a closer review of the literature demonstrates that they are highly complementary (Maruna & Mann, 2019). Both of them are anchored in the premise of “moral redeemability,” which assumes that for a vast majority of justice-involved individuals, criminality is not an immutable, permanent trait, but an adaptation to life circumstances that can be positively transformed (Maruna & Mann, 2019).



The Risks and Needs Assessment and Management Protocol for Offenders of the CSD identifies the rehabilitative needs and re-offending risks of PICs.

The compatibility of these two frameworks lies in their distinct but complementary analytical foci. The RNR model evaluates specific interventions that target criminogenic needs, including family ties and employment, whereas the Desistance model examines individual lives and personal trajectories of change, usually alongside the transformation of those needs into assets. Both are important in conceptualising and facilitating individuals' rehabilitation. Scholars frequently illustrate this synergy using a weight-loss analogy: while clinical evaluations of diets and personal issues (analogous to the RNR approach) are essential for identifying effective structured interventions, understanding how an individual successfully maintains weight loss over time requires an examination of their personal trajectory, social support networks and identity shifts (Maruna & Mann, 2019). By synthesising risk/need assessments with desistance-focused narrative studies, correctional agencies can more effectively address the sheer complexity of human behaviour.

The conceptual evolution of desistance draws heavily upon the interactionist framework of Lemert (1951), who originally distinguished between primary and secondary deviance to illustrate how social labelling stabilises criminal careers. Maruna and Farrall (2004) later formalised the distinction between primary — or Act desistance and secondary desistance, which requires a shift in self-identity. McNeill (2006) then introduced tertiary — or relational desistance to emphasise that long-term reform is ultimately dependent on social and structural validation.



A PhD graduate PIC shares his success story with his parents, encouraging lifelong learning and expressing gratitude for their unwavering support.

A central pillar of navigating this identity shift is rooted in narrative criminology, which suggests that the stories individuals tell about themselves shape their future behaviour (Maruna & Liem, 2020). Recidivists often adopt a “condemnation script” characterised by a sense of powerlessness, victimhood and resignation to a life of deviance (Sundt, 2010). Conversely, successful desistors actively re-author their identities using a “redemption script,” reframing their criminal pasts not as permanent stains but as preludes to their pro-social identities. This transformation is frequently manifested through “generativity,” wherein reformed individuals seek to mentor others, give back to communities, and find purpose in protecting future generations from making similar mistakes. Accordingly, CSD staff can encourage PICs to reconstruct these narratives through fostering hope, self-efficacy and a sense of meaning, while encouraging them to pursue generativity in different ways.

Importantly, the foundation for these transformative narratives can begin within the prison walls. While desistance theories frequently generalised community-based turning points such as marriage and employment, a local research highlights the potential of incarceration itself as a positive turning point when paired with structured rehabilitation programmes (Lee et al., 2025). The prison environment can successfully interrupt destructive cycles of addiction and force distance from previous anti-social networks, offering PICs a chance for self-reflection and personal growth and laying the groundwork for a new pro-social trajectory (Lee et al., 2025).

The Desistance model highlights that reform is deeply social, driven by the power of relationships, trust and collective effort (Simonsson et al., 2025). This concept of “coproduced” desistance emphasising on relationship factors serves as a crucial bridge to the RNR model. While RNR in prison can target personal criminogenic needs such as crime-endorsing cognitions, the desistance framework addresses the social capital needed to sustain those cognitive changes over time (Maruna & Mann, 2019). Risk reducing interventions are most successful when paired with a prosocial support network—either dedicated, trained rehabilitation staff or family members who support the individual’s desistance both inside and outside prison.



Ultimately, an internal cognitive shift must be met with external validation for rehabilitation to be truly sustained. The desistance journey progresses from Act to Identity desistance, and finally arrives at Relational desistance. This final stage dictates that transformation only endures when society, the law and the community genuinely accept the reformed individual (McNeill, 2014). Acknowledging this reality reinforces why the RNR and Desistance models are fundamentally complementary frameworks. No single criminal justice agency can orchestrate this entire process alone; it requires targeted interventions to reduce risk alongside robust community partnerships to create legitimate opportunities for social participation (National Institute of Justice, 2021). By weaving together the structured, evidence-based tools of the RNR paradigm with the deeply human, identity-focused insights of the Desistance model, the Hong Kong CSD is not just managing risks—it is delivering a truly comprehensive and integrated path to more lasting desistance.

Insights

1. Shared Foundational Belief

- Both the RNR and Desistance models share a belief that criminality is a changeable adaptation rather than a permanent trait.

2. Complementary Analytical Foci

- The compatibility of these frameworks lies in their distinct analytical foci: the RNR model evaluates specific interventions targeting criminogenic needs, whereas the Desistance paradigm examines personal trajectories of change alongside the transformation of needs into assets.

3. Relational Nature of Change

- Effective rehabilitation requires acknowledging the relational nature of change, utilising prosocial support networks to help individuals' safe transition into conventional environments.

4. Holistic Rehabilitative Approach

- Combining RNR service matching with an understanding of personal life trajectories allows for a more holistic, robust and successful approach to offender rehabilitation.

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