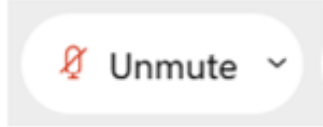
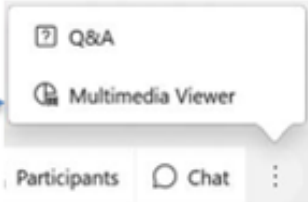



# Desistance From Crime

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

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# Opening Remarks

**Amy L. Solomon**

Acting Assistant Attorney General  
Office of Justice Programs

**Jennifer Scherer, Ph.D.**

Acting Director  
National Institute of Justice

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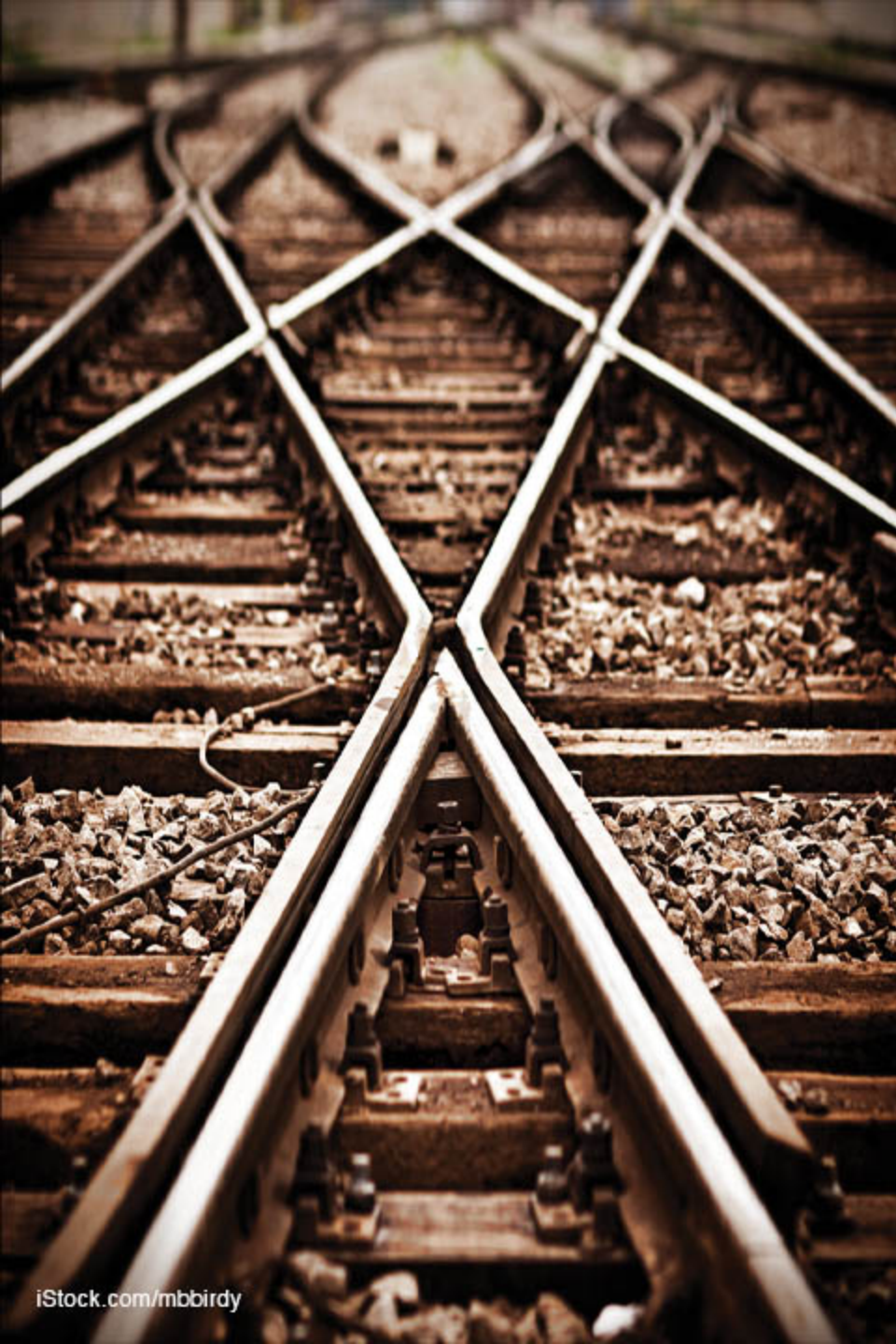
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# Desistance From Crime

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

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# But What Does It Mean? Defining, Measuring, and Analyzing Desistance From Crime in Criminal Justice

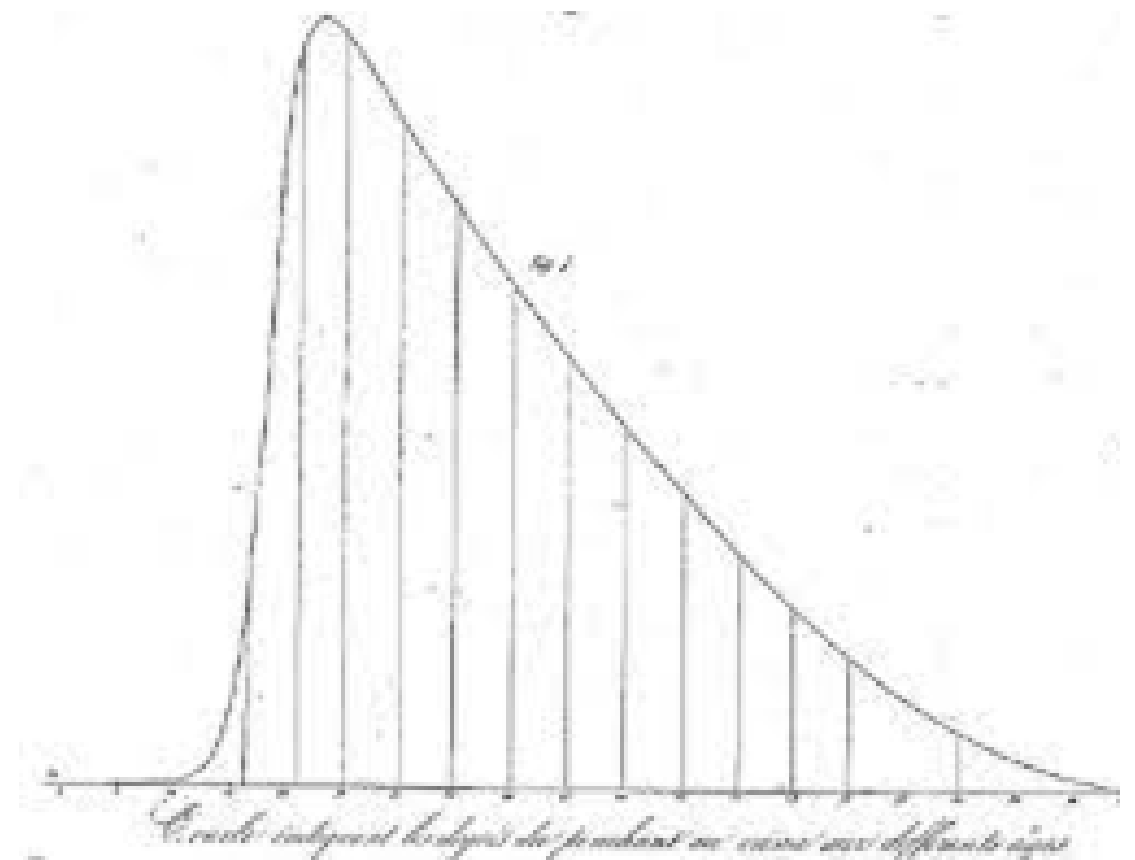
Michael Rocque  
Bates College

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# What Is Desistance?

- Age and crime
- Maturation reform
- Desistance etymology

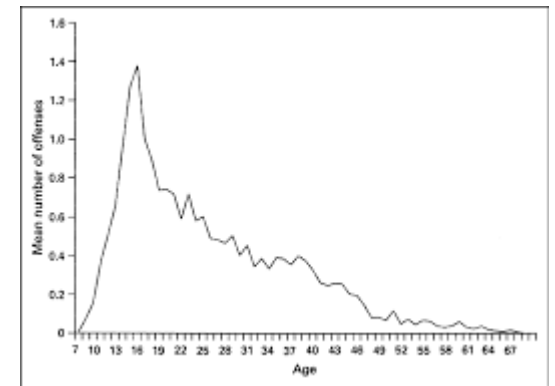


Source:

<https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-58>

# Conceptual Definitions

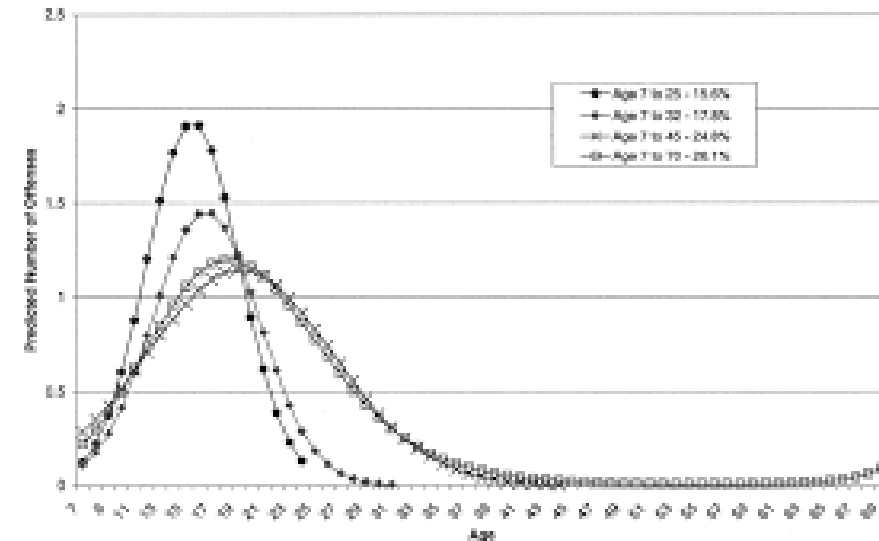
- Recidivism
- Early definitions (1970-1999)
  - binary, termination, event
- Current definitions (2000-present)
  - Stages, progression, process



Source: Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (2003). Life-course desisters? Trajectories of crime among delinquent boys followed to age 70. *Criminology*, 41(3), 555-592.

# Operational Definitions/Methods

- Generally followed conceptual definitions
- Early (1979-1999)
  - Offend/not
  - Logistic regression
- Current (2000-present)
  - Process
  - Trajectories and multilevel models



Source: Eggleston, E. P., Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2004). Methodological sensitivities to latent class analysis of long-term criminal trajectories. *Journal of quantitative criminology*, 20(1), 1-26.

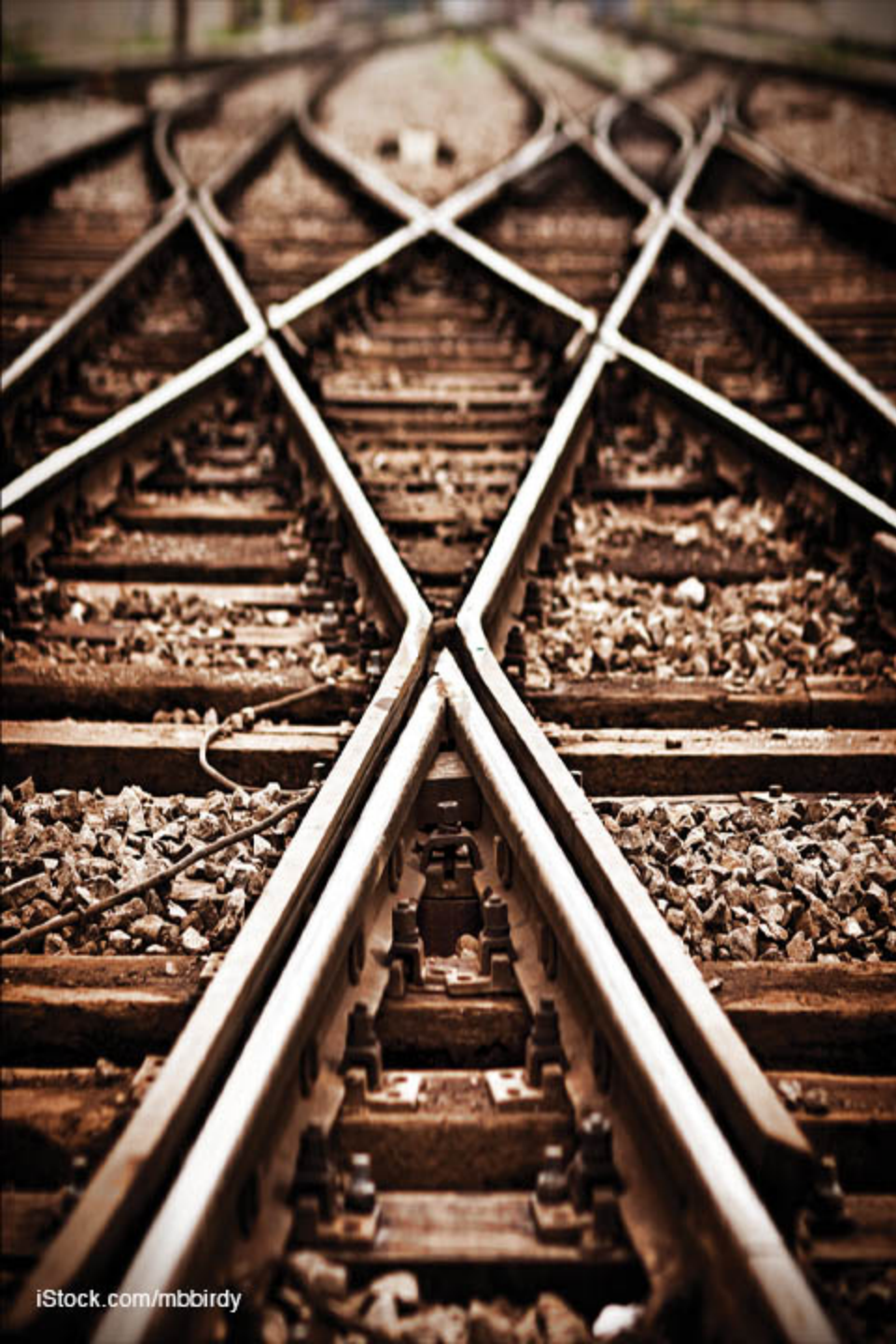


# Definition

....the process by which criminality, or the individual risk for antisocial conduct, declines over the life-course, generally after adolescence

# Implications and Recommendations

- Type of data matter
  - Survey/Official
  - General/Offending
- Follow-up/time frame
  - Longer the better
- Measures/modeling
  - Processual
- Indicators
  - Need not be crime



# Biosocial Factors and Their Influence on Desistance

**Danielle Boisvert**

Sam Houston State University



# Focus of Paper

- Desistance from crime from a biosocial perspective
  - Brain development, neuropsychological functioning, and stress system response
- Impact that risky lifestyles and adverse environments have on neuropsychological functioning and stress response
- Importance of researcher-practitioner partnerships
  - Increased interdisciplinary research

# Desistance from a Biosocial Perspective

- Developmental perspective
  - Normative brain development
- Beyond the “Big 5” to the “Critical 2”
  - Neuropsychological functioning
  - Stress system response
- Acquired neuropsychological deficits
  - Traumatic brain injury
  - Substance abuse
  - Impoverished environments

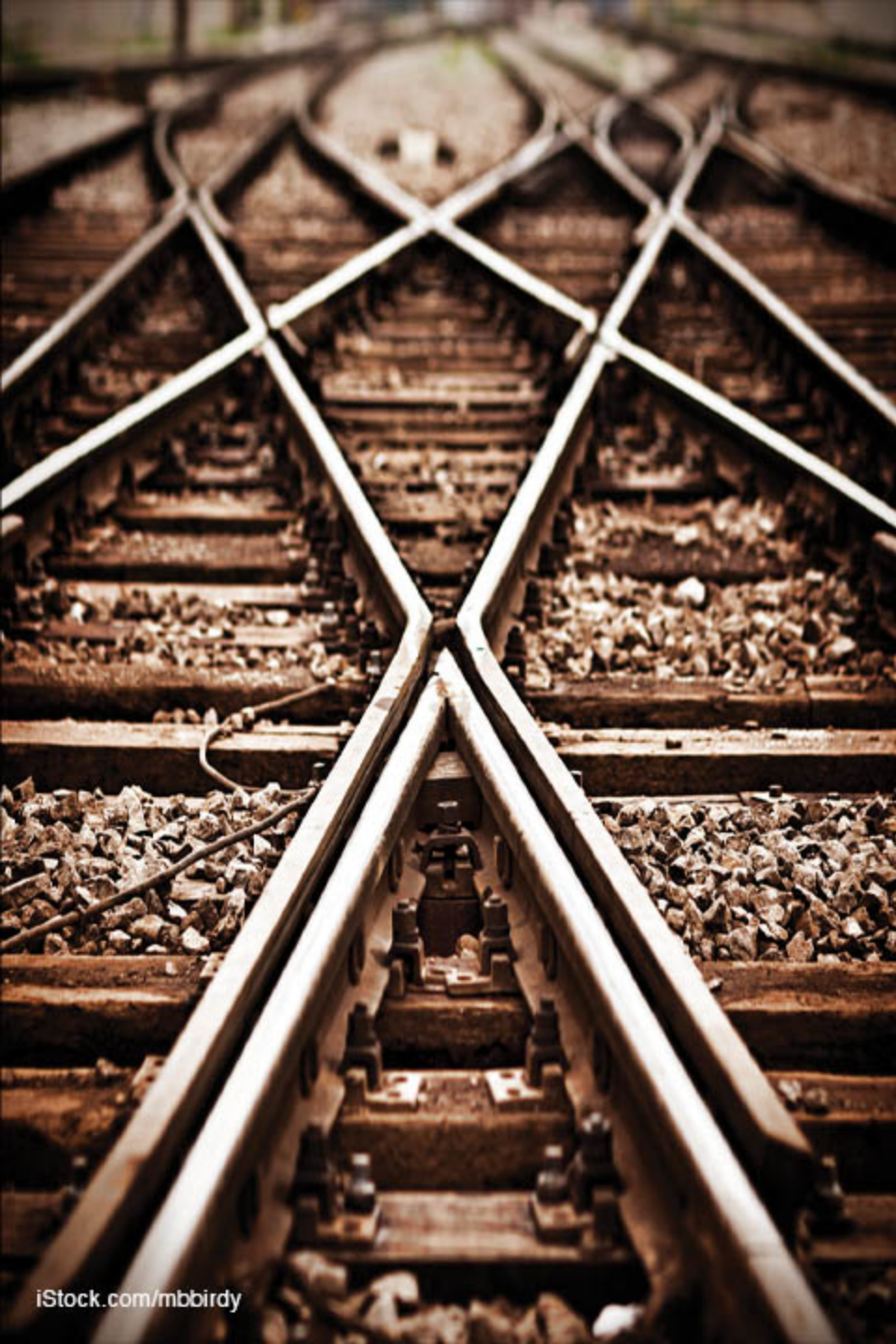
# Moving Forward

- Focus on enhancement plans
- Mitigate negative impact of conditions of imprisonment
  - Nutrition, exercise, sleep
  - Prosocial interactions
  - Limiting noise pollution, toxin exposure, and overcrowding
- Risk assessments
  - Create a Biopsychosocial Profile



# Moving Forward

- Programs to improve neuropsychological deficits
  - Cognitive remediation
  - Mindfulness training
  - Nutritional supplements
  - Medications for substance use and mental illness
- Programs to consider stress system response
- Strength-based approach



# The Impact of Incarceration on the Desistance Process Among Individuals Who Chronically Engage in Criminal Activity

Christopher Wildeman  
Duke University

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## Existing Research on Incarceration and Desistance

- Custodial sentences, longer sentences, and more punitive conditions of confinement increase crime (in the long-run)
- Also have negative effects on other core life-course outcomes (e.g., labor market, health and well-being, and family stability)
- Suggests incarceration likely inhibits desistance, on average



# Limitations of Existing Research

- No emphasis on individuals who chronically engage in crime
- Measurement problems all over the place on crime/contact
- Minimal attention to conditions of confinement
- Relies mostly on samples that don't generalize to today

# Limitations Notwithstanding

Seems likely that incarceration is at least as damaging to the desistance process for individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity as those who do not, and may be more harmful.

# Implications for policy

- Incarceration is costly and almost certainly does not promote desistance.
- Provided the short-term incapacitation benefits of incarceration are not so great that these alternatives are not feasible, policymakers might consider, when possible, a greater use of noncustodial sentences, cutting the length of custodial sentences, and markedly improving conditions of confinement.

# Implications for Practice

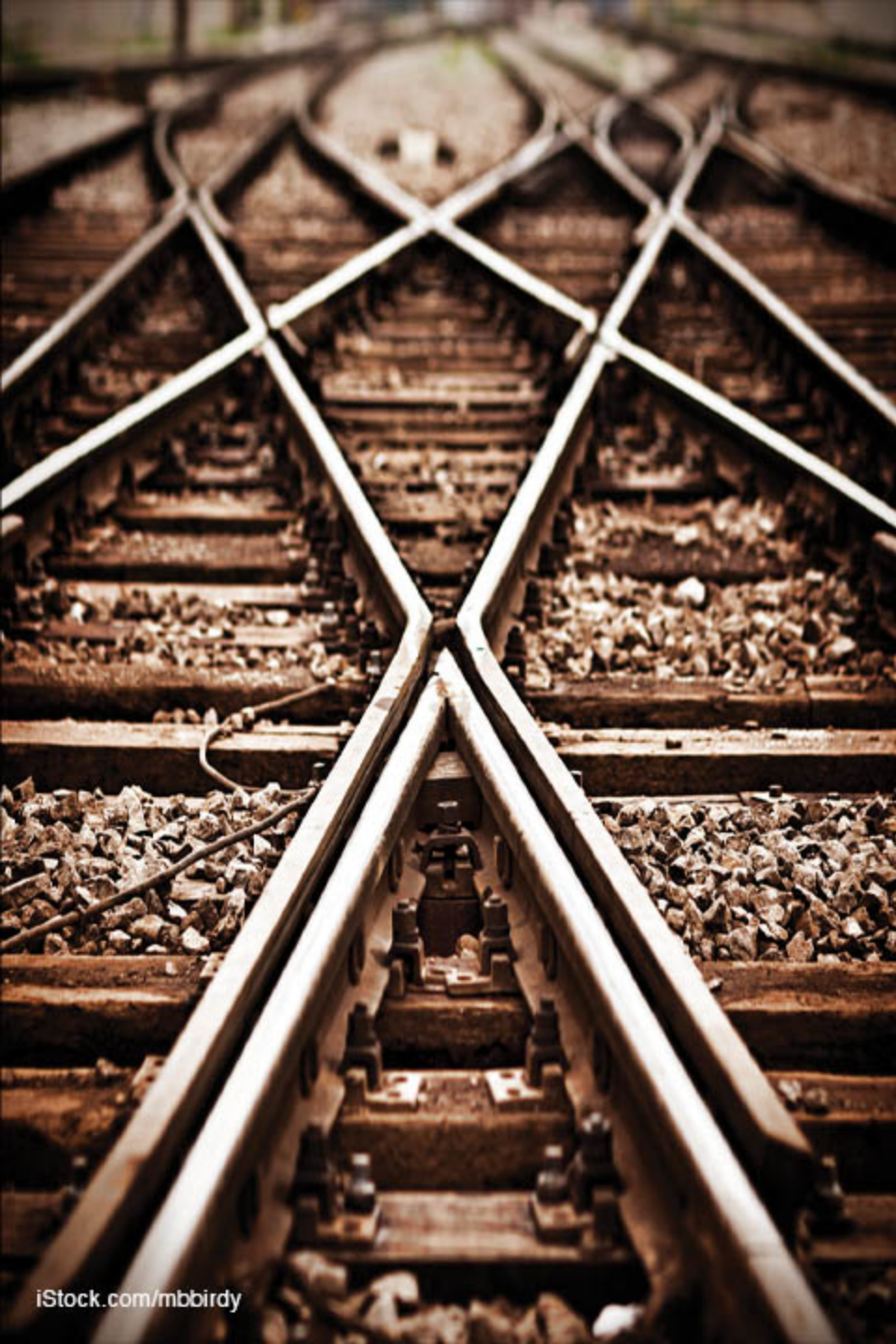
Challenges of system response to:

- More noncustodial sentences (especially probation)
- Shorter sentences (especially in terms of programming)
- Less punitive conditions of confinement (especially in terms of incorporating more challenging individuals)



# Avenues for Future Research

- Build on existing BJS holdings (especially NCRP and RSP)
- Enhanced studies on conditions of confinement
- Extend existing longitudinal studies (both of the general population and of juveniles/young adults who have been involved in criminal activity and/or been in contact with the justice system)



# Desistance-Focused Criminal Justice Practice

**Bret Bucklen**

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections

# “Recidivism” vs. “Desistance”

- Policymakers are mostly familiar with the concept of “recidivism,” but not with “desistance.”
- Academics argue “recidivism” is a limited concept:
  - Focuses on failure rather than success
  - Tends to be operationalized as a binary measure
  - Conflates measurement of criminal behavior with system responses to criminal behavior
- But problems with “desistance” as a concept:
  - Has been mostly a theoretical concept
  - Unfamiliar to most policymakers
  - No widespread agreement on how to define/operationalize it
  - Link between markers of desistance and criminal behavior is often correlational and weak

# “Recidivism” + “Desistance”

1. What behavior counts as recidivism?
2. What sources to use for measuring criminal behavior?
3. What time horizon to use for measuring desistance?



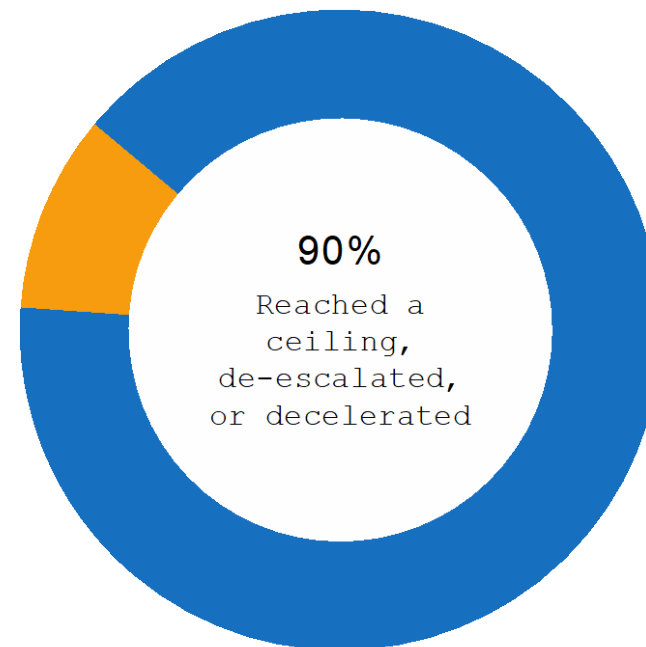
# Useful Concepts to Incorporate

1. Redemption research (Blumstein and Nakamura, 2009)
2. Signaling (Bushway and Apel, 2012)
3. Risk assessment - RNR

# Operationalizing Desistance

1. Deceleration
2. De-escalation
3. "Reaching a Ceiling"

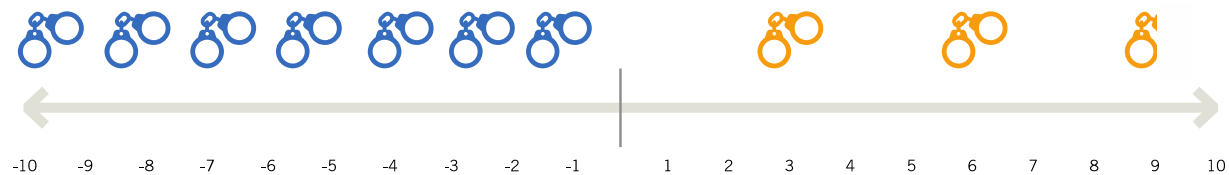
10%  
Did not meet any  
of the three  
desistance  
definitions



NOTE: these three concepts were borrowed from Loeber and Le Blanc (1990), with one difference being that "reaching a ceiling" is defined here differently than defined by Loeber and Le Blanc. This paper defines "reaching a ceiling" as complete cessation (or in other words, the inverse of recidivism).

# Operationalizing Desistance

**73% DECELERATED;  
COMMITTING 1 FEWER CRIME EVERY 2 YEARS**



Crimes per year free,  
in 10 years before release

Crimes per year free,  
in 10 years after release



**57 PEOPLE**

Avg. OGS = 5.6



**57 PEOPLE**

Avg. OGS = 3.8



**19 PEOPLE**

Avg. OGS = 4.3



**19 PEOPLE**

Avg. OGS = 5.2

**20% OF THE 100-PERSON SAMPLE RELEASED IN 2004,  
WAS NOT ARRESTED AGAIN OVER THE NEXT 15 YEARS**



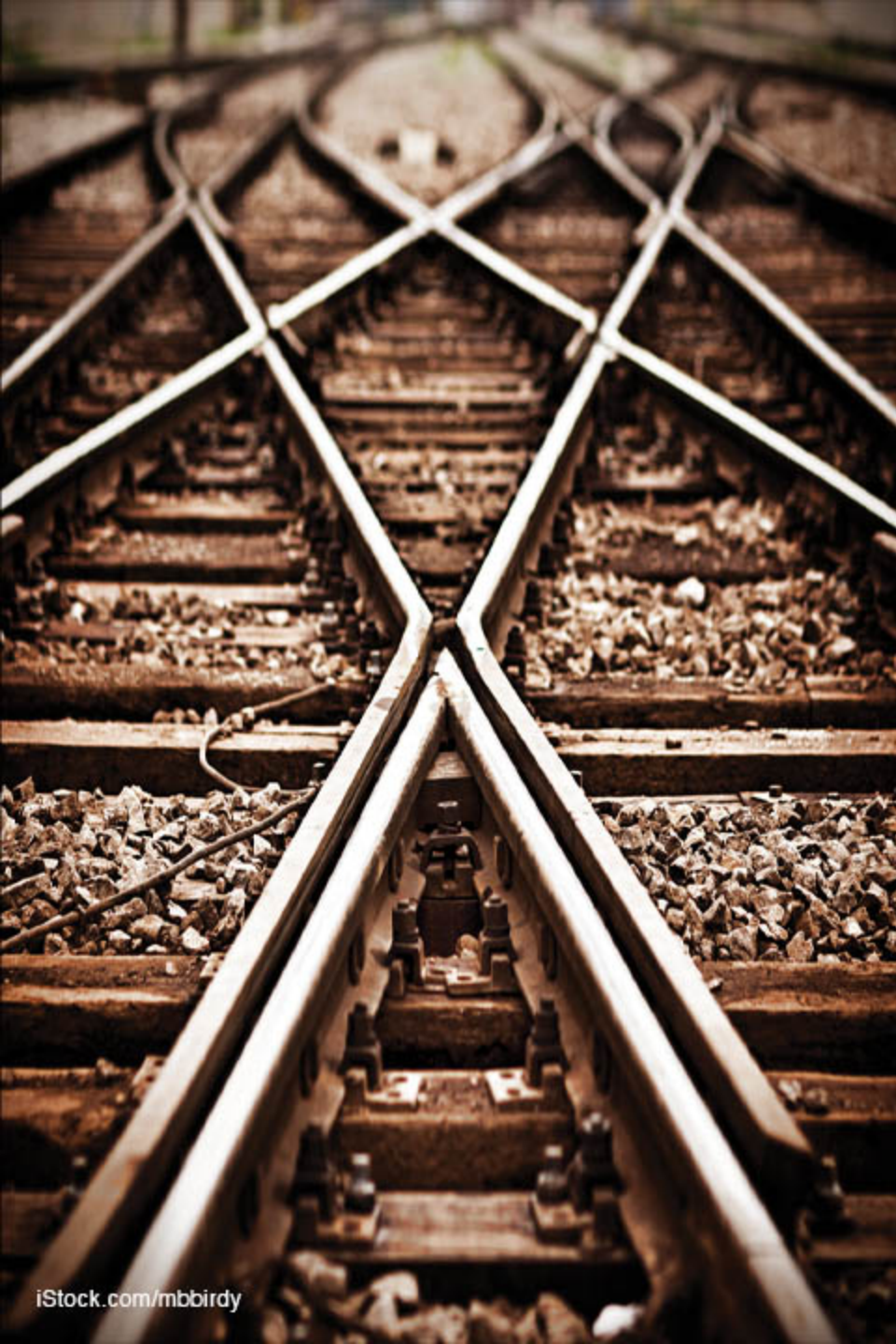
# Desistance-Focused Corrections Interventions

<b>Intervention Name</b>	<b>Theory of Desistance</b>
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Cognitive Transformation Theory
Motivational Interviewing	Cognitive Transformation Theory
Prison Visitation	Informal Social Control Theory
Family Counseling	Informal Social Control Theory
Employment and Education	Informal Social Control Theory
Relocation	Informal Social Control Theory
Religious Services	Informal Social Control Theory
Programming for Young Adults	Biological Theory
Medication-Assisted Treatment	Biological Theory
Building Human Agency	Rational Choice Theory
Contingency Management	Rational Choice Theory
Deterrence-Based Approaches	Rational Choice Theory
Procedural Justice Approaches	Procedural Justice Theory
Destigmatization	Labeling Theory

# “Real World” Considerations Going Forward

- Short time horizons for policymakers and politicians
  - Policymakers and politicians often plan short-term, but desistance requires longer time horizons
  - Can make use of probabilistic models, like risk assessment instruments
  - Should make use of rapid cycle experimentation (Bucklen, 2020)
- Budgets
  - More Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) needed
  - More cost-benefit analyses needed
- Non-criminal-justice outcomes
  - Criminal justice outcomes should remain the primary focus
  - Data may be hard to collect on non-criminal-justice outcomes
- Communication
  - Translational criminology
  - Researcher-practitioner partnerships





# International Perspectives and Lessons Learned on Desistance

Stephen Farrall  
University of Derby

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# International Perspectives and Lessons Learned on Desistance

- My paper focuses on how desistance has been defined and operationalized, and reviews the main associates and correlates of desistance.
- It then critiques many criminal justice systems' desistance-promoting elements and presents the lessons learned from various countries that have pursued such policies.
- Finally, it discusses some of the interventions that appear likely to support and promote desistance.
- I am going to focus on the **last** of these today.

# General Things That Can Be Done

The paper argues that criminal justice systems may need to adapt their current approaches so they more readily embrace the idea that people who want to desist:

- Have **strengths** that can be harnessed, while admitting that there are weaknesses that need to be avoided. This implies a **change to assessment procedures**.
- Need to be treated **individually** (at least some of the time) and **given opportunities** (rather than threats or punishments) to which they will want to respond positively.
- Should be engaged and employed as **co-producers** of their own (and others') desistance. This implies a **greater use of former service users** in peer mentoring schemes and as program designers.

# General Things That Can Be Done, cont.

- Will face **setbacks** and relapse during their journey away from crime. Realism rather than idealism is the watchword here.
- Will find **informal**, rather than formal, interventions most valuable and meaningful.
- Do better when they are **kept out of prison** or sent to prison only briefly (whenever possible).
- Will be more likely to remain out of trouble when criminal justice system workers **support them** in the wider social and community contexts in which they live. This means partnering with religious institutions, employers, community groups, local sports groups, and other organizations based in the community.

# General Things That Can Be Done, cont.

- Will do better when the criminal justice system **supports** their relationships (where appropriate).
- Should be encouraged to practice **newly formed social identities** (such as parent, partner, and employee) in supported contexts.
- Should have good **progress recognized** and, if possible, certified.
- Can be supported in careers (either formal employment careers or those developed away from the economy, such as school governor, homemaker, and volunteer) by **selective access** to their previous criminal histories.

# Some Practical Suggestions

- The USA needs to roll back from the reliance on **high rates of imprisonment**, back towards a criminal justice system which relied less on imprisonment and more on community disposals.
- Change assessment/planning systems to **recognise strengths** as well as risks (no longer 0-10 no risk/risk, but -10 to +10 risk/strength).
- Directly employ former-offenders in **socially positive roles** - building homes for others, counselling, recycling schemes, setting up their own firms (catering, building, cleaning services and so on).

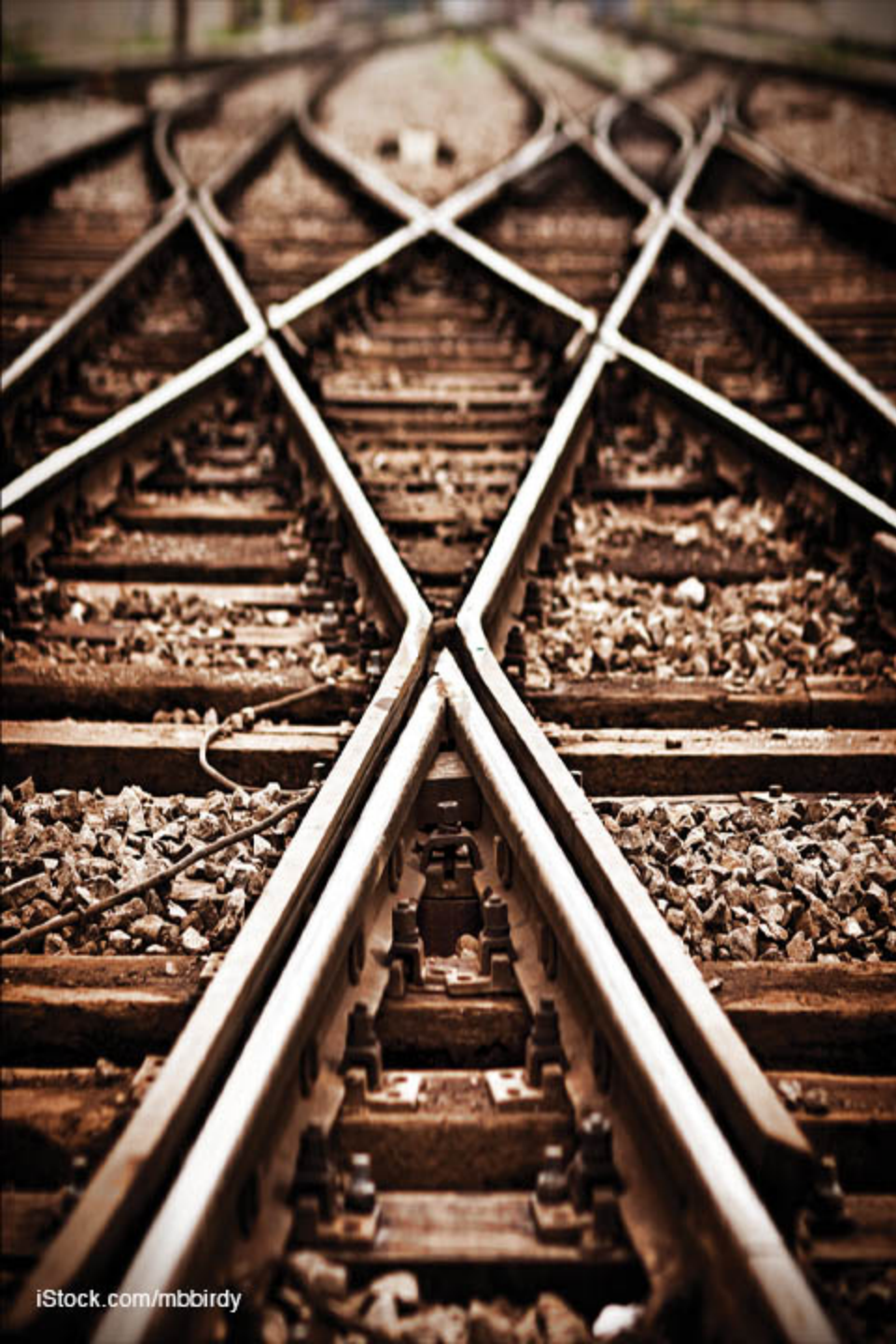


## Some Practical Suggestions, cont.

- Building family relationships and **social capital** to access jobs and resources to support change.
- Create **circles of support** for individuals to assist transformation.
- Create ‘**decertification**’ or ‘**judicial rehabilitation**’ schemes to seal former criminal histories.
- Focus on **solving future challenges**, rather than trying to unpack past (unless unpacking will assist in the future in some way).

# What to Do Next

- Pilot schemes to both start some of these ideas and to evaluate some of the outcomes associated with them.
- These projects will need to be well-supported both financially and ‘politically’ and given the time to produce lasting outcomes (5 year funding as a minimum).
- Evaluations ought to be independent of those running the projects (universities and so on), in order to develop transferrable insights using the most up-to-date research methodologies and theories.
- Projects will need to be assessed prior to funding and will vary from state to state, city to city and neighbourhood to neighbourhood; recognise cultural and ethnic diversity.
- Draw upon experience of researchers and user services/providers to plan, assess and evaluate these projects.



# Pathways to Desistance From Crime Among Juveniles and Adults: Applications to Criminal Justice Policy and Practice

Lila Kazemian

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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# Some Empirical Facts about the Transition from Juvenile Offending to Adult Crime

- The paradox of the age-crime curve
- The cognitive profiles of emerging adults (18-24 years old)
- Desistance from crime as a process rather than an abrupt event

# Desistance-Promoting Law Enforcement

- Police arrests can negatively affect known correlates of desistance:
  - HS graduation (Kirk & Sampson, 2013; Dennison & Demuth, 2018)
  - Employment outcomes (Dennison & Demuth, 2018)
  - Mental health outcomes (Sugie & Turney, 2017).
- Arrests that do not lead to a conviction are a poor indicator of criminal behavior & create undue stigma
- Law enforcement strategies with promising insight for desistance efforts: active partnerships with other agents of the CJS

# Promoting Desistance in the Courts

- Sentence severity does little to prevent reoffending
- The crucial role of prosecutors
  - Great deal of discretionary power in determining whether to charge or dismiss a case, severity of the charges, conditions of a plea bargain, and an individual's trajectory in the CJS
- Prosecution of emerging adults (18-24 years old)
- Promising initiatives in prosecution: Fair and Just Prosecution
  - Aims to shift traditional prosecutor culture with a reform-driven model of prosecution



# Desistance from Crime in the Context of Incarceration

Prison impedes desistance from crime by:

1. Harming ties to key social institutions
2. Neglecting the mental health needs and trauma histories of incarcerated individuals
3. Disproportionately focusing on rule violations and failing to track and reward progress
4. Creating an environment that may be incompatible with the outside world

# Desistance-Promoting Supervision Practices

- Supervision system is well-equipped to detect recidivism, but not necessarily conducive to desistance from crime
- Probation/parole supervision would benefit from striking a better balance between:
  - Informal and formal control structures
  - Imposing sanctions and providing incentives
- We need reentry practices that reward paths to redemption

# Calling for a Paradigm Shift: Recidivism-Focused versus Desistance-Promoting Interventions

- Regarding desistance from crime as a process and normalizing relapses (e.g., offenses that do not pose a threat to public safety)
- Integration of both recidivism & positive outcomes, and a better equilibrium between punishments and incentives
- Interagency collaborations to promote desistance from crime
- Desistance-promoting (tough-on-crime) versus punitive (tough-on-“criminals”) approaches

# Questions?

Please enter your questions into the [Q&A](#) box

Send to **ALL PANELISTS**