Summary

Out of prison, out of crime? Women on the road to desistance

Each year, a couple of thousand women are released from one of the women’s prisons in the Netherlands. These women have to re-build their lives outside of prison. Ideally, they also refrain from further offending, a process that is called desistance. Although there has been an increase in studies on women’s desistance from crime, most knowledge on desistance stems from studies of male offenders. The theoretical debate on desistance centers around, on the one hand, theories that focus on indicators of informal social control and, on the other hand, theories that focus on subjective change. As the basis of most of these theories lies in the aforementioned studies on men, it is unknown whether these findings and theories generalize to women offenders. The central aim of this thesis is to describe the pathways out of crime of formerly incarcerated women. In so doing, it also contributes to this theoretical debate by disentangling structural, external factors and subjective, internal factors influencing desistance from crime.

A mixed-method approach was adopted to achieve these objectives. First, a systematic literature review (n = 44) was conducted to examine the current state of knowledge on women’s desistance from crime, as well as gender differences in desistance (chapter 2). Next, based on a sample of women released from prison in 2007 (n = 2839), the factors that reduce or increase the risk of re-incarceration and crime after release were examined. A dataset containing information on re-incarceration and convictions during follow-up was constructed, complemented with information on marriage, romantic relationships, children, household status, employment, and social benefits. In chapter 3, these variables were examined on a monthly basis, by constructing a person-month file that contains information on all variables for every month of the follow-up period. To be able to examine the women’s lives in even greater detail, a person-week file was constructed for the final quantitative analyses (chapter 5). Lastly, in-depth interviews with a subsample of women (n = 30) were held to shed light on the mechanisms underlying the findings from the quantitative analyses, while also uncovering factors that could not be examined quantitatively (chapters 4 and 5).

The literature review (chapter 2) showed a wide range of factors related to women’s movement away from crime, most notably motherhood and
romantic relationships. Positive effects of other forms of social capital, such as employment, and individual factors, such as agency, were found as well. As for gender differences, it was found that women benefited more from positive relations than men and employment impacted male offending more than female offending. Importantly, this review of the extant research on desistance demonstrated a lack of consistency in the findings. For example, some quantitative as well as qualitative studies showed that motherhood increased rather than decreased the risk of offending. Moreover, employment, a factor that was often found to be only marginally important to women in quantitative studies, contributed to desistance greatly as indicated by some qualitative studies. This finding indicates that the effect of employment might be overlooked when one is relying on quantitative measurements only. Based on this review, it was concluded that future desistance studies should combine quantitative and qualitative measurements to shed further light on these inconsistencies, and to examine whether variables that have been found to influence men's desistance might be just as relevant to women's pathways out of crime.

The quantitative analyses in chapter 3 first showed that a considerable number of women were re-incarcerated at some point during the follow-up period (40 percent). Next, it was examined whether marriage and motherhood, the most-often studied factors related to women's desistance, affected the risk of re-incarceration in this high-risk sample of women in the Netherlands. It was found that marriage and motherhood only lowered the likelihood of re-incarceration in the months they occurred together in a full family package. Although these results support studies indicating that the combination of different forms of informal social control has a larger effect on desistance than either one alone, they deviate from studies showing an independent crime-reducing effect of motherhood and marriage on desistance.

To elaborate on these findings, a qualitative examination of the family-lives of 30 women was conducted in chapter 4. Of these women, 11 were not registered for an offense during the follow-up period and, as such, they were labeled as desisters. Findings from the interviews showed that most of the 30 women were mothers of one or more children and in a romantic relationship, but that only two women were married (one desister and one persister). A small minority of the sample was in what could be regarded a full family package consisting of both a romantic partner and children. Most women described how they had been in abusive relationships previously, influencing pathways into crime and drug use. Although desisters as well
as persisters described agentic moves related to ending (former) abusive relationships, desisters were more likely to be in stable, supportive relationships that had, according to them, a positive influence on their desistance efforts after release from prison. Their partners made them strive towards a normal life, increased their self-esteem and, most notably, made them see themselves differently. Moreover, their partners provided them with other basic needs, such as housing, and women indicated that they did not want to jeopardize this new, stable life by committing further offenses.

With regard to motherhood, feelings of love and pride for children prevailed in all narratives. That said, a wide range of problems related to motherhood was described as well, ranging from financial problems to problems with regaining custody after children had been taken into care. In comparing desisters and persisters, desisters more often described having a (renewed) close relationship with their children, whereas persisters more often struggled with mother-child problems. Some persisters literally described how not being able to take care of their children had contributed to their recidivism. Lastly, it was found that women in both subgroups experienced an array of difficulties in their daily lives, ranging from problems with housing, finances, and drug use. These problems often appeared to interfere with the potential beneficial influence of motherhood and romantic relationships. Together, these findings shed light on why motherhood and romantic relationships do not always lead to desistance.

Following this, a mixed-method approach was adopted in chapter 5 to study what other factors, besides children and romantic relationships, influence desistance efforts after release from prison, and how. To do so, complete judicial documentation was obtained for 1478 formerly incarcerated women. According to this information, about half of the women were not registered for an offense during the follow-up period (n = 778) and were thus classified as desisters. After constructing the person-week file, providing information on all variables on a weekly level, a series of multivariate hybrid random effects analyses was conducted. The within-individual analyses (but not the between-individual analyses) showed that marriage increased the odds of offending. By contrast, the between-individual analyses (but not the within-individual analyses) revealed that cohabitation, children and being employed lowered the odds of offending. Interestingly, age and receiving income support for being homeless had a significant and substantial effect on offending in both within- and between individual analyses; apart from other factors, women were more likely to
offend in the weeks they were younger and in the weeks they received this type of income support.

The interviews shed light on these findings. The women's narratives showed that circumstances after release from prison were often harsh for all women, but that desisters and persisters fared differently during follow-up. Desisters more often acquired a stable place to stay and a meaningful job. Women assigned a lot of meaning to these factors, as they played an important role in their efforts to make ends meet after release, while they also contributed to their new sense of themselves as non-offenders and normal citizens. Housing appeared to be an important prerequisite for other positive factors to come into play. Consistent with this finding, persisters were more likely to be homeless or in otherwise unstable living situations, to experience severer drug-problems, and to work as a prostitute. Importantly, while both desisters and persisters mentioned a desire to do things differently, desisters more often than persisters described taking initiatives that matched this desire, such as going to an employment agency and seeking help to overcome drug problems. These actions were found to be the result of realisations, or 'eye-openers'; women realised that things had to change, they became afraid of the future, or they realised that they are worth more than what their lives had brought them thus far. As such, these findings provide insight into internal processes contributing to desistance. Specifically, they underscore the complex relationship between life events, internal changes, and desistance.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, some theoretical implications were provided, as well as conclusions relevant for research, policy and practice. First, it is clear that often-studied factors in relation to women's desistance from crime do not, by themselves, lead to desistance. This holds true for romantic relationships (even positive ones), motherhood, and employment. Although it was found that these factors of informal social control can have a positive influence on the desistance process, it appeared that women needed to experience subjective changes first, after which social capital served to reinforce these changes. These findings support studies that show a decrease in offending even before factors of social control come into play, as well as identity theories of desistance.

Second, the quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that having a place to stay after release from prison is pivotal. In fact, the narratives indicated that housing formed the basis for sustained desistance in two different yet related ways. First and foremost, housing enabled women to take advantage of other turning points, such as employment. Without
having a place to stay, it turned out to be almost impossible to maintain (let alone acquire) social capital. This matches the finding that the beneficial influence of having a romantic partner may have resulted partly from the house that came with that partner. Further, just as meaningful employment was found to reinforce changed identities, housing also contributed to new perspectives on life, as it placed having a normal, structured life against their ‘old’ life filled with uncertainties and problems. Indeed, women’s new perspectives when they had stable housing contrasted sharply with the old ones in which a fear of ‘dying out on the street’ was not uncommon.

Following these findings and conclusions, some recommendations can be made. First of all, there is a need to study the process of desistance in even greater detail. One of the limitations of the present study is the retrospective nature of the qualitative part. Women’s stories might have changed as a function of time passing by. Thus, mixed-method, prospective longitudinal research on the influence of subjective and social changes on desistance is warranted. Nonetheless, the findings of this dissertation raise the expectation that programs aimed at successful reintegration will be more effective when initial and internal motivations to change are stimulated, noticed and/or reinforced. Moreover, it is of utmost importance to address the variety of contextual problems formerly incarcerated women face, as these problems were often found to interfere with efforts to desist from crime after release from prison.