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General introduction
1.1 Introduction

Each year, over 2000 women are released from one of the women's prisons in the Netherlands. These women have to re-integrate into society. As an inherent part of successful reentry, they will have to reframe from further offending, e.g. desist from crime. Yet, research has shown that recidivism rates amongst formerly incarcerated women are high, indicating that the road to criminal desistance might be a bumpy one for these women.

Most of our knowledge about criminal desistance stems from experiences of male offenders. To date, studies have pointed at a wide range of factors contributing to or hampering men's criminal desistance, most notably marriage, employment, parenthood and drug problems. Although these findings are important, they do not a priori pertain (to the same extent) to women offenders. In fact, scholars have asserted that men and women offenders tend to have different histories that affect their desistance efforts, and that they might be affected differently by the same factors. Women's victimization histories are often mentioned as a gender-specific factor influencing desistance (Belknap, 1996; O'Brien, 2001). Moreover, marriage is said to have a positive influence on men only, given that women offenders tend to ‘marry down’ to an antisocial partner (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998), while parenthood might be more beneficial for women than for men (Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009).

Currently, the theoretical debate on desistance is dominated by on the one hand theories that focus on the aforementioned factors of (informal) social control (Laub & Sampson, 2003) and on the other hand those that focus on subjective change (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Here too, the basis of most of these theories stems from studies of male offenders, leaving the question of whether these theories generalize to women offenders unanswered.

Knowledge on factors contributing to women's desistance is especially relevant when it comes to formerly incarcerated women. As mentioned, their recidivism rates are high (Linckens & De Looff, 2010), causing high societal costs. Moreover, the majority of incarcerated women have children, and research has shown that these children are seriously affected by their mothers’ imprisonment (Dallaire et al., 2015; Hissel et al., 2011). At the same time, the post-release period is often characterized by ‘a co-occurrence of multiple demands’ (Richie, 2001, p. 380), where women have to find housing, secure employment or another form of income, address specific issues such as drug and mental health problems and reunite with family and friends. As Visher and Travis (2003, p. 89) noted, ‘avoiding crimes
can be the least of problems’ under the sometimes difficult circumstances formerly incarcerated women face.

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the road to desistance of formerly incarcerated women. To that end, two interrelated research questions were formulated. The first question is: what factors contribute to or hinder women’s desistance after release from prison? The second question is: how do these factors influence women’s desistance efforts? To answer these research questions, a mixed-method approach was adopted employing officially registered longitudinal data on offending and a broad range of life events, complemented with interviews.

In this chapter, previous studies on (women’s) desistance from crime are reviewed and placed into theoretical perspective. Next, some limitations of desistance-studies in general are discussed. This introductory chapter then concludes with a description of the present study and an outline of the remaining chapters.

1.2 Empirical research on desistance

1.2.1 Marriage, employment and desistance

Although desistance from crime has long been “the least studied process” of the criminal career, relative to the onset and persistence of offending (Laub & Sampson, 2001, p. 4), the number of studies examining desistance has grown rapidly during the last fifteen years. In addition, the concept of desistance has increasingly been informed by longitudinal studies, enabling scholars to draw informed conclusions on a wide range of factors contributing to desistance.

Of these factors, marriage and employment have most often emerged in the literature as central to the desistance process (Roque, 2017). Over two decades ago, Laub and Sampson pointed at marriage as a ‘turning point’ in the life course, one that would guide offenders away from crime. Since then, a large body of research has supported the notion that marriage has a protective effect on offenders, and, as a result, “consensus has grown among scholars that marriage holds the potential to promote desistance from crime – commonly known as the ‘marriage-effect’” (Bersani & Doherty, 2013, p. 400). For example, Sampson, Laub, and Wimer (2006) found evidence for a causal effect of marriage on desistance, even after controlling for a broad range of individual factors, and the positive effect of marriage was also found by others (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2005, Li & MacKenzie, 2003; Warr, 1998). More recently, however, scholars have begun to question the direct effect of marriage on desistance. First, studies have shown that
the marriage-effect is (at least partly) dependent on the specifics of the marriages and marital partners under study, such as the propensity to marry (King et al., 2007), the quality of marriages (Forrest, 2007), and attachment between the spouses (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998). Second, some studies have shown that desistance actually precedes entry into marriage (Beijers, Bijleveld, & Van Poppel, 2012; Lyngstad & Skardhamar, 2013; Skardhamar et al., 2015), challenging the marriage-effect even more.

As for employment, several studies have shown that having a job is associated with desistance from crime (Savolainen, 2009; Uggen, 2000; Verbruggen, 2014; Wright & Cullen, 2004). As holds true for the study of the marriage-effect, the causality of the effect of having a job on desistance has been contested in recent years; scholars have argued that factors such as job stability, attachment to the labor market, type of job and timing of job entry might be more important than having a job in itself (see Verbruggen, 2014, for an overview of studies on the relation between employment and (desistance from) crime).

1.2.2 Women’s desistance from crime

Along with the recognition that there might be more to criminal desistance than ‘just getting married’ or ‘just entering the workforce’, scholars have started to examine the different mechanisms underlying women’s desistance from crime as compared to that of their male counterparts. While a focus on the specific needs of women offenders originated with the work of feminist criminologists, ‘mainstream’ scholars have also pointed out the importance of studying the correlates of desistance and the gendered processes influencing desistance. For example, Laub and colleagues (1998) stated that, given the differences in offending between men and women, men tend to marry ‘up’ to a prosocial partner, whereas women more often marry ‘down’ to an antisocial partner. Following this, one would expect the marriage-effect to be smaller, if present at all, in samples of women offenders.

Following traditional gendered scripts, women would also be less likely to take advantage of being employed. Although women offenders often face harsh financial circumstances (Cobbina, 2009; Richie, 2001; Visher & Bakken, 2014), they might be more likely than men to find other sources of income. Opsal (2012) mentions this in regard to having “an employed spouse or government support, to meet their basic needs” (p. 379). Moreover, it has been argued that parenthood, rather than marriage and employment, might have a crime-reducing effect on female offenders, given the central
role parenthood generally has in women’s lives. Conversely, scholars have indicated that children might form an additional source of stress to women offenders, who are often single mothers (Michalsen, 2011).

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of studies on women’s desistance from crime, likely dictated by the aforementioned speculations on gender differences combined with rising numbers of women in the criminal justice system in many countries (Walmsley, 2015; Olson, Stalans, & Escobar, 2016). Most of these studies focus on factors that are traditionally regarded as central in women’s lives, such as parenthood and romantic relationships. Indeed, findings on the influence of motherhood are inconsistent, and this inconsistency also comes to the fore in studies examining gender differences in desistance; while some studies have found that the effect of being a parent is larger for women than for men (Benda, 2005; Giordano et al., 2011; Gunnison, 2001; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998), other studies found the opposite effect. For example, Zoutewelle-Terovan and colleagues (2012) found that only men were positively affected by parenthood in the sense that their offending levels were lowered.

Similar inconsistent results have been found for the effects of romantic relationships and employment on desistance. Marital as well as nonmarital romantic relationships have been found to reduce crime in women-only samples as well as in studies comparing genders, while these factors sometimes contributed to increased offending. In addition, several studies have found differential results depending on the type of crime under study, and characteristics of the romantic relationship or the (former) offenders themselves. For example, Griffin and Armstrong (2003) found that cohabitation lowered involvement in nondrug crimes, whereas it increased the number of crimes related to drugs. Partner’s antisociality and crime levels were found to influence desistance (Simons & Barr, 2012). King et al. (2007) found that only women with medium propensities to marry benefited from marriage. As for employment, the (mainly) quantitative studies on the effect of having a job have shown that employment might lower the likelihood of offending in women (Craig & Foster, 2013, Verbruggen et al., 2012), but that it could also increase criminal opportunity (De Li and MacKenzie, 2003). In general, most studies comparing genders showed the effect of employment to be larger for men (Benda, 2005; Simons et al., 2012; Verbruggen et al., 2012), indicating that gender differences might in fact be in play.

Lastly, a consistent finding stemming from desistance studies is that individual problems related to mental health, drugs, housing and finances can interfere with women’s desistance-efforts (Benda, 2005, Huebner et al.,
It is likely that these problems form what was referred to earlier as the ‘co-occurrence of multiple demands’, potentially counteracting the influence of other (positive) life events. As such, these findings beg for an examination of the correlates of desistance in the context of the broader circumstances faced by (former) female offenders.

Interestingly, some studies noted that while one form of social control did not contribute to reduced offending or termination from crime, a combination of different forms of social capital did influence desistance. For example, Giordano et al. (2002) found that individuals who had a so-called ‘respectability package’ consisting of a job and a marriage were less likely to offend than individuals whose lives included just one element of social capital. Similarly, Zoutewelle-Terovan and colleagues (2012) found that the effect of marriage and parenthood increased when these family-life events occurred together in a ‘full-family package’. These studies indicate that the effect of certain turning points might be indirect through an accumulation of social capital, and that a combination of different forms of social control might turn into something larger than the sum of its parts.

Summarily, the abovementioned studies point at inconsistencies related to correlates of desistance in general, as well as to women’s desistance specifically. Moreover, it seems as though women are affected by some of the same factors that have been found to be important to men, but that there might be gender-specific processes at play as well. As such, these studies ask for a closer examination of the mechanisms underlying women’s desistance.

1.3 Theoretical framework

Along with a growing recognition that criminal desistance is not something that happens overnight, scholars have begun to view desistance as a process, rather than a one-off occurrence that represents whether or not someone has actually terminated offending. Within this conception of desistance as a dynamic process, reduced offending could also be seen as a form of desistance, one that could eventually lead to full termination.

While recent years have witnessed an enduring theoretical debate on how individuals progress through different stages of desistance to eventually reach a state of termination of crime, theoretical efforts to explain desistance from crime are not at all new. Over thirty years ago, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) argued that, given that offending declines with age, aging should be seen as the one and only explanation of desistance (and of
the age-crime curve in general). In their view, the effect of all other factors should be regarded the result of selection.

Although the relation between age and crime is not denied by other theorists, Hirschi and Gottfredson’s focus on age as the single underlying explanation of crime and desistance has been contested heavily. Rather, scholars have argued that age brings with it a series of other factors that, in turn, influence crime and desistance. As Roque (2017, p. 122) summarizes the critique of those scholars, “age has been mistakenly used as a proxy for biological changes. It means much more than that; only by understanding what aging really means can we get closer to understanding why criminal desistance occurs”.

One of the best-known desistance-theories that views age as more than just biological reform is Sampson and Laub’s age-graded theory of informal social control (1993; 2003). According to their theory, that is based on longitudinal data on a sample of 500 delinquent boys collected from 1940 onwards (Glueck & Glueck, 1950), individuals establish different social bonds throughout their lives, bonds that match their (biological) age. For example, children form bonds with their parents, emerging adults with peers, romantic partners and through school, and adults acquire social capital by getting married and employed. Laub and Sampson propose that these bonds, when of good quality, bind individuals to society, and provide them with something to lose if they would commit crime. Desistance from crime thus occurs as a result of acquiring sufficient age-related forms of social capital. Thus, “although age is clearly important in understanding desistance... most offenders desist in response to structural turning points” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 278). As such, their theory offers an explanation of the crime-reducing effect of marital and non-marital relationships and motherhood as found by some studies. In Laub and Sampson’s view, women who are in good-quality relationships will be less likely to (re-)offend than women who do not have these relationships. Moreover, the ‘quality-component’ of their theory could partly explain the inconsistent findings reviewed above, given that many studies only examined the presence of social bonds, and disregarded their quality.

Although highly influential, the age-graded theory of informal social control has been criticized for its emphasis on external, social factors, while largely ignoring the individuals’ own influence on desistance (although Laub and Sampson (2003) did recognize the importance of agency in a reformulation of their original theory). The idea that processes within the ‘self’ contribute to desistance has been recently postulated by several
scholars within different theories, most notably the theory of cognitive transformation (Giordano et al., 2002), redemption-theory (Maruna, 2001) and the identity theory of desistance (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). What these theories have in common is that they all emphasize the influence of identity (changes) on desistance. The theories can be distinguished based on the precise mechanisms underlying the influence of identity, as well as the degree to which identity impacts desistance in the absence of other factors. For example, Giordano et al. (2002) propose that individuals need to go through four types of cognitive transformations in order to be able to desist from crime; they need to experience an openness to change; they need to be exposed to “hooks for change” (i.e. the external factors as central in the age-graded theory of informal social control); they need to change the way they view themselves to envision a new self; and they need to see criminal behavior as something they do not desire (any longer). At the other end of the identity spectrum, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) contend that desistance is the result of an almost rational decision to change one’s identity, one that is made after a accumulation of negative experiences related to offending and an offending lifestyle. In their view, (former) offenders have experienced a “crystallization of discontent”, making them realize that offending has been harming them in all sorts of ways. They then start envisioning a positive, possible self, and start to act accordingly.

Following the line of reasoning as proposed by the aforementioned identity-theories, external factors such as marriage, parenthood and employment do not automatically lead to desistance, not even if they are of good quality. What is (more) important is that these forms of informal control support changed identities, and, as such, help individuals in sustaining desistance. Maruna (2004) has advanced the theoretical debate by distinguishing between primary and secondary desistance, where primary desistance refers to an initial attempt to stay away from crime, whereas secondary desistance occurs after a change in identity took place. It could be, then, that different forms of social control are not enough to enable individuals to reach secondary desistance in the absence of changes in identity. This, in turn, might explain why some studies failed to find an effect of specific life events on desistance. Motherhood, for example, might (in itself) not be enough to contribute to desistance (which matches the fact that many imprisoned women already had children before they first entered prison), and the same goes for romantic relationships and employment.
1.4 Limitations of previous studies

As can be deduced from the description of the prevailing desistance-theories, desistance is not something that can be easily measured. Whereas quantitative assessments might enable researchers to draw conclusions on some correlates of desistance, they are unable to contribute to an understanding of why certain factors do or do not influence desistance. Moreover, factors related to identity changes are difficult to examine quantitatively, and are thus calling for complementary research designs. Yet, most studies on desistance employ quantitative or qualitative research methods, making it impossible to examine the influence of external factors in relation to internal ones, as well as the time order of events. Earlier, Laub and Sampson (2001, p. 41) noted that “there is currently no way to disentangle the role of subjective vs. objective factors as the cause of desistance” and they argued that “a creative integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods in this area could lead to a major contribution to our understanding of desistance” (p. 55).

In addition, prior research often lacked detailed, dynamic information on offending and other factors under examination, making it difficult to draw reliable conclusions on effects or influences, let alone causal relations. For example, independent variables often reflect the offenders’ situation at one specific time-point (very often the point of release from prison), after which these are used to predict a specific outcome (most often offending or re-incarceration). Although these findings do add to general knowledge on correlates of desistance and persistence, longitudinal research designs are needed to bring us closer to drawing conclusions on causal relations.

Moreover, desistance-studies have often examined factors related to informal social control without taking into account the context in which desistance does or does not occur. Desistance clearly does not occur in a societal vacuum, and, especially when it comes to studying formerly incarcerated individuals, a consideration of crucial factors such as housing and financial circumstances appears warranted.

1.4.1 Social demographic context and penal climate

Finally, most studies on desistance were carried out in Anglo-Saxon countries. However, the question remains whether these findings generalize to other (western) countries, given that there are important differences related to, among other things, social institutions, prison systems, and welfare systems. Following this, some knowledge on the Dutch social demographic context and penal climate is important as this sets the stage for the dissertations’ findings.
First, while many studies on women’s desistance from crime examine the influence of marital relations, the institution of marriage has become much less prevalent in the Netherlands during recent decades. Whereas getting married in early adulthood has long been the standard in the Netherlands, it is now more common to have non-marital romantic relationships. Related to this, the number of children born out-of-wedlock has increased drastically; in 1970, about 2% of all children born alive were born out-of-wedlock, but by 2013 almost half of all newborn children had unmarried mothers (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2015; Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007). It is likely that these changes go hand in hand with changed norms and values. More importantly, they ask for a close examination of the effects of non-marital relationships, having children born out-of-wedlock, and modern forms of full-family packages.

Second, the Dutch welfare system is characterized by a relatively strong social safety net, consisting of many types of social security. For example, people can apply for unemployment and disability insurances, and people with a minimum income can appeal to social assistance (see Verbruggen, 2014, for a description of the Dutch welfare state). The fact that the Dutch welfare system is much more generous than its US counterpart could potentially influence the effect of specific life events, such as employment. For example, being able to access different benefits might reduce the effect of (un)employment on offending. On the other hand, being employed might do more for (former) offenders than just providing them with an income. Indeed, Savolainen (2009) found that employment contributed greatly to men’s desistance in Finland, a country with a social support system that is even more generous than the Dutch one. The author speculated that “the decision to find work is preceded by subjective processes like cognitive transformations” (Savolainen, 2009, p. 301). This dissertation will assess whether these findings also come to the fore within a sample of women offenders in a similar liberal society.

Lastly, compared to the United States (and many other Anglo-Saxon countries, for that matter) prison sentences in the Netherlands are relatively short, with each prisoner spending an average of 100 days in prison in 2016 (with half of the prison sentences being shorter than one month, and two-thirds being shorter than three months) (DJI, 2017). Moreover, the number of prisoners in the Netherlands is relatively low in general, and decreased in recent years from 17,600 prisoners at one specific time point in 2005 to a little over 9,000 prisoners in 2015 (with women constituting between 5 and 7% of the total prison population). Although the early twenty-first century
gave rise to a more punitive climate in the Netherlands (Tonry & Bijleveld, 2007), the notion of rehabilitating offenders has remained prominent over time. This translates into less short prison sentences in favor of imposing community service, and a renewed focus on humanity and resocialization (Kruttschnitt & Dirkzwager, 2011). It is likely that this penal climate affects outcomes after release from prison and efforts to desist from crime. This penal climate could affect outcomes after release from prison in different ways. First, because getting a prison sentence has become increasingly rare, formerly incarcerated individuals might experience more stigma after release from prison. On the other hand, a focus on rehabilitation might result in more support for (formerly) incarcerated individuals, increasing chances of desistance.

1.5 The present study
To overcome the abovementioned limitations, the present study employed a mixed-method design to study, in detail, the desistance process of formerly incarcerated women in the Netherlands. More specifically, longitudinal, time-varying information was used to examine the correlates of desistance and persistence during the post-release follow-up period, after which narratives of the women themselves provided insight into the mechanisms underlying these correlates. As such, this dissertation attempted to explain inconsistencies as presented by previous studies, while also disentangling structural, external factors and subjective, internal factors influencing desistance.

1.5.1 Sample and data
This dissertation is based on a sample of women who were released from prison in 2007 and who were registered in the Municipal Population Register (“Gemeentelijke Basisadministratie” [GBA] (n = 2839)). The sample was drawn from the Custodial Institutions Agency (“Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen” [DJI]) in the Netherlands, which holds information on dates of incarceration and release. The women’s prison records were then complemented with register-data up to 2014 coming from different sources, as well as in-depth information from interviews conducted with a subsample of the women themselves.

After conducting a systematic review of the literature on female desistance from crime and gender differences in desistance (chapter 2), information about marriage and children was extracted from the GBA. The GBA is a centralized automated population registration system, holding information
on all legal residents in the Netherlands. Based on dates of marriage and divorce, as well as birthdates of legally recognized children, multiple time-varying variables were constructed to assess whether women were married and/or a mother during the follow-up period. Moreover, their prison records were used to construct a variable assessing whether, and if so when, women were re-imprisoned during follow-up. This combined information made it possible to assess the influence of marriage and parenthood on the risk of re-incarceration in this high-risk group of (formerly) incarcerated women (chapter 3).

Next, complete judicial documentation (also called ‘rap sheets’) on offenses was collected for about half of the original sample \(n = 1478\). The rap sheets were drawn from the Judicial Information Service (JustID) and contain all cases registered at the public prosecutor’s office, offenses from age 12 onwards (the minimum age of criminal responsibility in the Netherlands) and the verdicts. This information was then complemented with information on specific life circumstances as drawn from the Social Statistics Database\(^1\) (SSB) from Statistics Netherlands (CBS). More specifically, I examined whether at any given day during the follow up period women were married or cohabiting, whether they were a mother, whether they had their children living with them at home or elsewhere, whether they were employed and whether they received one of the types of income support that are most common in the Netherlands (namely for unemployment, disability or public assistance, with ‘benefits for homeless people’ coded as a specific subtype of public assistance). This information, in the form of time-varying variables, was then used to examine the influence of these life circumstances on the risk of offending (chapter 5).

Lastly, semi-structured interviews were held with a subsample of 30 women. These women were recruited through DJI by sending an invitation letter to their last known address\(^2\). The interviews were held at the respondents’ homes, and covered numerous topics, such as their criminal career, family life, employment, housing, drug use and their daily lives after release from prison. These interviews were then used (a) to qualitatively

\(^1\) This national database is “a system of interlinked and standardized registers and surveys” (Bakker, Van Rooijen, & Van Toor, 2014, p. 411) and contains information on a wide range of factors, including but not limited to households, jobs, benefits, and pensions.

\(^2\) Before the start of data-collection, this studies’ approach was checked and approved by the Ethics Committee for Legal and Criminological Research (CERCO) of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Moreover, official permission to conduct this study was granted by DJI, GBA, JustID and CBS.
examine the influence of romantic relationships and motherhood on desistance (chapter 4) and (b) to elaborate on the mechanisms underlying the influence of the broad range of life circumstances that were first quantitatively examined (chapter 5).

1.5.2 Analytical approach
To be able to answer the different research questions, various analytical techniques were used throughout this dissertation, with the longitudinal character of the data as the common denominator of the empirical chapters. In chapter 3, a Cox proportional hazards model was estimated to show the risk of re-incarceration during follow-up, after which multilevel fixed and random effects analyses were used to examine, on a monthly basis, the influence of marriage and motherhood on the risk of re-incarceration. In chapter 5, using information on a weekly level, a logistic hybrid random effects-model was estimated to investigate the influence of a broad range of factors on actual offending, while simultaneously controlling for time-invariant variables such as prior periods of incarceration and country of origin. Lastly, the interviews (chapter 3 and 5) were analyzed during a process of identifying common themes within the narratives, hand-coding of these themes, and repeated examination and interpretation of the specific codes, leading to a detailed reconstruction of the women’s lives.

1.6 Outline of the following chapters
The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 provides a systematic literature review of studies on women’s desistance from crime, as well as gender differences in desistance. Chapter 3 offers a quantitative assessment of the influence of marriage and motherhood on the risk of re-incarceration. Chapter 4 elaborates on these findings by qualitatively examining how family life events impacted the women’s post-release lives and their desistance efforts. Chapter 5 then broadens the scope of this study by quantitatively and qualitatively reviewing the influence of family life events as presented in chapters 2 and 3 against the influence of employment, social benefits, housing and drug use. Finally, chapter 6 provides a general discussion, including a summary of the main results and implications for theory, research, policy and practice.