General discussion
6.1 Introduction

You think, now I have to make a decision. Either you die... or you start living a normal life [Lynn].

This thesis aimed to describe the pathways out of crime of formerly incarcerated women. Drawing on existing theories and recent studies on (particularly men’s) desistance from crime, it sought to examine which factors contribute to or hinder women’s desistance efforts, and how. By employing a mixed-methods design, this thesis assesses correlates of women’s (failed) desistance while simultaneously providing a detailed description of their lives after release from one of the women’s prisons in the Netherlands.

First, a systematic review of the literature on female desistance from crime and gender differences in desistance was conducted (chapter 2). Next, all women who were released from prison in 2007 were drawn from the Custodial Institutions Agency (DJI) in the Netherlands. Prison-records of 2839 women were then complemented with register-data on marriage and children up to 2013 to assess the influence of these forms of social capital (both separately and combined) on the risk of re-incarceration (chapter 3). Subsequently, in-depth interviews with a subsample of women (n = 30) were held in 2014/2015 to shed light on how marriage, romantic relationships and children might impact desistance (chapter 4). Lastly, complete judicial information up to 2014 containing all offenses from age 12 onwards was collected for a random half of the original sample (n = 1478), and this dataset was complemented with additional information on household status, employment, and income support. Coupled with findings from the interviews, study 4 resulted in a mixed-method analysis of a range of factors either contributing to or hindering desistance efforts during the follow-up period (chapter 5).

This concluding chapter is organized as follows. First, the main findings of the studies are summarized. Next, the results will be discussed and considered in light of existing theories. Following this, implications for policy and practice are provided. Lastly, limitations of this thesis are outlined and, based on these, directions for future research are suggested.
6.2 Main findings

In recent years, the number of studies on desistance from crime has grown substantially. As a result, knowledge on factors related to desistance in general but also on women’s desistance specifically has increased. In the first study of this thesis (chapter 2), 44 quantitative and qualitative articles on female desistance and gender differences in desistance were systematically reviewed. The results of this study pointed at 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, whereas employment impacted male offending more than female offending. However, the review also pointed at a significant problem in desistance-research, namely that of inconsistency. For example, whereas most studies found a crime-reducing effect of motherhood and marriage, others found no or even crime-enhancing effects. And, where most (quantitative) studies concluded that employment did not contribute to women’s desistance efforts that much, some (qualitative) studies found that having a job actually had the potential to re-direct women’s lives and to reduce offending. In conclusion, it was argued that future research should integrate quantitative and qualitative findings to explain some of these inconsistencies, and to provide an answer to the question what factors contribute to women’s desistance, and how these factors influence desistance.

Given that marriage and motherhood were found to be the most-often studied factors related to women’s desistance from crime, while also producing the most inconsistent findings, I quantitatively examined whether these forms of social capital lowered the risk of re-incarceration in a sample of high-risk women in the Netherlands (chapter 3). The results first showed that about 60% of formerly incarcerated women were not re-incarcerated at any point during follow-up, whereas 40% did spend additional time in prison (of these women, 20% were re-incarcerated within the first year after release). After creating a person-month file that showed, on a monthly level, whether women were married, whether they had children and whether they were in a so-called full family package consisting of marriage and children, 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.

Next, we elaborated on these findings by using interviews with a subsample of 30 formerly incarcerated women (chapter 4). The women’s
narratives consisted of in-depth information on a broad range of topics, including but not limited to their family life and criminal career. Of the 30 women, 19 women were registered for an offense during follow-up, whereas 11 women were classified as desisters. While most women were mothers of one or more children and in a romantic relationship, only two women were married. Earlier, it was mentioned that the institute of marriage has become less prevalent in recent decades. However, the number of married women in this sample is significantly lower than in the general population (7% of women, compared to 40-50% of the women in the general population). 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 had been abused by their (former) romantic partners and the majority of women in both subgroups had experienced difficulties related to their children, ranging from financial problems to problems with (regaining) parental responsibility before and after release from prison. 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. Moreover, they had been more successful in strengthening bonds with their children after release from prison. That said, women from both groups expressed a desire to turn their lives around for their children. Lastly, some persisters pointed at severe problems related to, among other things, their financial and living situation and drug problems, and their narratives showed how these problems interfered with the positive influence of other factors. More specifically, some women failed to desist despite being married or a mother, whereas other women, who lacked these forms of social capital altogether, did manage to desist.

Following this, the final study (chapter 5) first quantitatively assessed the influence of a wide range of factors, most notably household status, marriage, motherhood, employment and different forms of income support on desistance and recidivism during follow-up, after which a qualitative examination of the nature of this influence was employed. About half of the women (n = 778) were not registered for an offense during follow-up and were labelled desister. On average, desisters had been in prison longer before their 2007-release than persisters, although they had been in prison fewer times (throughout their lives) than persisters. The majority of women in both groups had at least one child upon release. Desisters were more likely to be married upon release than persisters, and they were more often employed
at some point during follow-up. In contrast, persisters more often received income support for being homeless and public assistance than desisters.

For the hybrid random effects analyses as conducted in this study, a unique person-week file was created, thus providing insight into the aforementioned variables on a weekly level. The within-individual analyses (but not the between-individual analyses) showed that marriage increased the odds of offending, whereas cohabitation, children and being employed lowered the odds of offending in the between-individual analyses (but not in the within-individual analyses). Interestingly, age and receiving income support for being homeless had a significant and substantial effect on offending according to 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. By contrast, 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.

6.3 Discussion and theoretical implications

Motherhood, romantic relationships and desistance

The findings of this dissertation support the idea that good quality family relationships are important to formerly incarcerated women, as argued by Sampson and Laub (1993;2003). However, it also appears that these relationships do not, by themselves, lead to desistance. With respect to romantic relationships, it was found that having a pro-social partner (as opposed to the abusive partners many women previously had) had the potential to contribute to desistance by making the women strive towards a normal life, by increasing their self-esteem and, most notably, seeing themselves differently. Moreover, their partners often 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.

Although these findings partly adhere to the perspective of informal social control, they also show that romantic partners affect desistance
efforts through a process of internal change, supporting identity theories of desistance, and through providing practical support. This claim is reinforced by the findings that romantic relationships by themselves did not lower the risk of offending in the quantitative analyses (and being married even increased the risk for those women who re-offended during follow-up), while being in a full-family package did lower the likelihood of re-incarceration. Previously, Giordano and colleagues (2007) elaborated on how a prosocial partner can function as “an agent of social control, but also as an ever-present emotional role model and source of social support” (p. 1615). Indeed, the women in the current sample described how they had benefited from exactly those things. It seemed as though taking on a (new) role as family woman brought with it practical and emotional support, as well as a willingness to strive towards a normal life. As such, the present findings underscore the importance of taking into account more subjective changes as well as the broader circumstances surrounding these women.

Similar conclusions can be drawn based on the women’s accounts regarding motherhood. Being close to one’s children contributed strongly to an internal motivation to cease the criminal lifestyle, supporting the viewpoint of Giordano and colleagues (2002) that children can serve as a ‘hook for change’. In examining their narratives more closely, it appeared that women expressed different sorts of fears related to their children, varying from a fear of losing their children as a result of continued offending to fearing the consequences for their children if they would end up in prison again. As such, these accounts fit into the theoretical framework as proposed by Paternoster and Bushway (2009), in that they are to a certain degree rational and fearful of the future; the women described a ‘feared’ situation that they did not want to encounter, motivating them to change and re-direct their lives. However, as was the case for romantic relationships, the quantitative analyses did not show an effect of motherhood on offending. Moreover, and perhaps even more important, internal processes were found in the accounts of desisters as well as persisters, although desisters more often than persisters described positive relationships with their children. So, while motherhood (through a process of internal change) might be an important component of the desistance process, it also proved to be insufficient to move women into a pattern of desistance and to bring about lasting change, a conclusion that has been drawn by other scholars (Giordano et al., 2002; McIvor, 2015). Thus, the overall conclusion must be that romantic relationships and motherhood can contribute to desistance, but only when other conditions are met. First, as suggested by Sampson and
Laub (1993), romantic relationships and the mother-child bond need to be of good quality. Second, and moving beyond this mere focus on relationship quality, these relations have to be coupled with (or even preceded by) more internal motivations and identity changes. These internal factors were found to influence women's ability to take advantage of hooks for change (Giordano et al., 2002), after which these hooks (especially in the form of a full family package) served to reinforce changed identities. Lastly, the broader circumstances have to support a new life that is free of crime. More specifically, contextual factors (most notably housing, see below) appeared to form the basis on which women could work on the first two conditions.

**Employment and desistance**

Employment is probably one of the most extensively studied life events and is considered to be a key turning point in the lives of (former) offenders. However, as mentioned at the outset of this dissertation, scholars disagree on where employment should be placed at the structural-subjective continuum. A large body of research has shown a direct association between employment and reduced offending, indicating that employment might indeed serve as a primary turning point leading to desistance. In contrast, other scholars have argued that the effect of employment on crime is in fact spurious, given that many offenders were found to reduce offending prior to the employment transition (see for example Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014). This thesis added to the understanding of the influence of employment on the desistance efforts of women, who are generally found to benefit less from employment than their male counterparts (Benda, 2005; Verbruggen et al., 2012). The quantitative finding that a large crime-reducing effect of employment vanished after controlling for (unmeasured) within-individual factors contests the viewpoint that employment automatically acts as a primary turning point. Rather, this result indicates that the effect of having a job on offending is dependent on other factors. Indeed, the qualitative part of this study showed that desisters described qualitatively different, particularly more meaningful jobs. This result, coupled with desisters’ tendency to describe a link between their job and their identity, corresponds to the view that subjective changes underlie the influence of employment, as suggested by identity theories of desistance. Moreover, the finding that desisters described other, more active efforts to getting a job indicates that subjective changes may even precede securing employment, and that processes of informal social control resulting from employment come into play later on.
With regard to these subjective changes, one has to keep in mind that there are subtle yet important differences between identity theories. While Maruna (2001) proposes that former offenders underwent a process of identity-reformulation during which they started to view their true selves as non-offenders, Paternoster and Busway (2009) argue that former offenders have made an active, rational shift from an old, criminal self to a new, law-abiding one. In examining the narratives of the women more closely, evidence for both types of identity change was found in relation to employment, varying from women stating that having a job matched their idea of ‘not being a bad person’ to women mentioning that they were fed up with their old life and that they wanted to do something different with their lives. Interestingly, this latter motive featured in the narratives more prominently than financial motives, and desisting women who started doing unpaid voluntary work described similar positive outcomes. Although it is likely that increased financial resources did influence post-release desistance efforts, these findings show that the positive influence of employment goes well beyond a mere financial aspect. These findings are especially interesting in light of the examination of the employment experiences of previously institutionalized men and women as conducted by Verbruggen and colleagues (2014). The authors found that employment lowered offending in men and women, but that income support only lowered offending in men. Based on this finding, they concluded that employment reduced men’s offending (at least partly) through relieving financial strain, but that the effect of employment on women’s offending was likely caused by other mechanisms.

As for the processes of informal social control, it is important to note that they appeared to impact desistance in different ways. As mentioned before, desisters described other, more meaningful types of jobs than persisters, keeping them from committing further offenses. As has been found previously, it is the quality of a job, rather than the mere status of employment, that has the potential to reduce offending (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen & Wakefield, 2008), and the current results support this claim. Moreover, employment seemed to have an indirect impact on desistance as it served to reinforce initial subjective changes by increasing women’s self-esteem and changing how they viewed themselves. For example, women mentioned how being part of a team of co-workers and getting responsibilities made them feel better about themselves, and that they started to enjoy their new role.
Taken together, these findings are important in a couple of ways. First, they match the results on romantic relationships and motherhood in the sense that they suggest that subjective changes are an important part of the desistance-process, and that women are unlikely to achieve desistance (or meaningful employment, for that matter) in the absence of subjective changes. Previously, LeBel and colleagues (2008) found evidence for a subjective-social model, in which ‘subjective changes may precede life-changing structural events and, to that extent, individuals can act as agents of their own change’ (p. 155), and the current results support their findings. However, the results do point at the importance of considering both subjective and social factors, as they continuously interact to reinforce one another.

Second, these results nuance the often-heard assumption that men are more likely to benefit from employment than women, an assumption that is largely based on traditional gendered scripts in which men are more often employed than women. My findings indicate that employment can in fact have a positive and substantive influence on women’s pathways out of crime, just as has been found for men. That said, previous studies have indicated that men benefit from employment mainly through processes of monetary gain and informal social control (see for example Verbruggen, 2014; Ramakers et al., 2017), whereas the current qualitative study indicates that, for women, employment serves to reinforce subjective changes. Although I am unable to test this inference, it could be that the mechanisms underlying the beneficial effect of employment is in fact gender-specific. If so, these gender-differences likely influence the impact of standard employment programs. For example, men might benefit more from well-paid employment, whereas women might benefit more from employment that is meaningful and that follows upon efforts to increase agency and self-esteem.

The broader circumstances: housing, drug use and financial circumstances
This thesis also aimed to shed light on the broader circumstances impacting desistance efforts of formerly incarcerated women. To date, most studies on desistance have examined life events as if they were influencing desistance in a vacuum. At the same time, it has been argued that post-release experiences, most notably housing, drug problems, and financial difficulties, could impact formerly incarcerated women to a large degree. More specifically, these experiences could counteract the benefits of potential crime-reducing factors such as relationships and employment,
or even prevent them from coming into play in the first place, given that
‘avoiding crimes can be the least of problems’ under the sometimes difficult
circumstances formerly incarcerated women face (Visher & Travis, 2003, p. 89). Taking stock of this gap in knowledge, the current study also examined
the influence of housing, drug use and financial problems, and assessed
whether and if so how these factors impacted desistance efforts.

My 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. Second, 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 to the old ones in which
a fear of ‘dying out on the street’ was not uncommon, motivating women
to stay away from crime.

Another major challenge for formerly incarcerated women was to kick
the habit of drug use (i.e. recovery). As mentioned before, the majority of
interviewees described that they had experienced drug problems before
going to prison. Moreover, their drug use had caused all sorts of other (e.g.
financial) problems and was often mentioned in relation to their offending
behavior. In turn, many women attributed their previous/continued drug
use to their adverse circumstances, most notably housing instability and
troubled histories related to childhood trauma and abusive partners. In
essence, they were found to use drugs to cope with these circumstances, a
finding that is in line with previous studies (Leverentz, 2006a; McIvor, 2015;
Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Taylor, 2008), pointing at drug use as a factor
influencing pathways to prison and post-release outcomes. Interestingly,
whereas some of these scholars argued that drug use needs to be considered
a gender-specific variable affecting both pathways into prison as well as
post-release outcomes, a recent Dutch study on gendered pathways into
prison showed remarkable similarities related to the influence of drug use
on men’s and women’s pathways to prison (Joosen, Palmen, Kruttschnitt,
Bijleveld, Dirkzwager, & Nieuwbeerta, 2016). As such, this study underscored
the general (and thus gender-neutral) adverse influence of drug use on offending.

Noteworthy, romantic partners were again (as was true with regard to housing) mentioned in relation to drug use as a post-release barrier to desistance. More specifically, romantic partners either supported women’s recovery efforts, thereby increasing chances of success, or they hindered recovery efforts by persuading them to use drugs (again). It might not come as a surprise that the latter behavior was more often ascribed to the partners of persisters.

Taken together, drug use seemed to impact these women’s lives in different ways. Although it was not possible to access quantitative data on drug use, the qualitative findings support the relevance of regarding desistance from crime in light of desistance from drug use, as proposed by some scholars (Colman & Vander Laenen, 2012; Maruna et al., 2004; Graham, 2016). Interestingly, desisters were more likely than persisters to have taken active steps to resolve their drug problems out of a fear for the future and as part of a broader process of change, whereas some persisters explicitly said that using drugs was ‘part of who they are’. These findings adhere to identity theories in the sense that successful recovery appeared to be related to self-image and (stimulated by) internal change, whereas condemnation scripts (Maruna, 2001) were employed in relation to continued drug use. As such, desistance success and failure was partly influenced by a process of reciprocal causation, where the ability to refrain from drug use impacted desistance, while it was (partly) shaped by a willingness to change and the broader circumstances.

Lastly, financial difficulties were common amongst women in both subgroups, as indicated by a large number of women receiving income support and the fact that the majority of interviewees mentioned having debts. These difficulties further complicated their post-release situation in different ways. Not having a place to stay and being unable to pay for the necessities of life hampered women’s ability to sustain desistance. Moreover, severe financial problems interacted with the aforementioned problems related to housing and drug use; women were unable to pay the rent, and/or they used their money (often welfare money) to buy drugs. Earlier, it was mentioned that employment impacted desistance through mechanisms other than financial-related ones, but that financial resources most likely influenced desistance as well. Indeed, desisting women, who more often secured some form of employment, also described better financial circumstances, although it is difficult to establish what came first.
Taken together, my findings lend support to theories that underscore the importance of internal changes and agentic moves in achieving prolonged desistance and, eventually, termination. That said, they also show that subjective changes do not occur in a vacuum; an initial willingness to change can (and need to) be reinforced by different forms of informal social control. Importantly, this willingness can be hampered by difficult circumstances, most notably a lack of housing. As such, these findings could explain the seeming contradiction between on the one hand prison-studies that report high degrees of prisoners’ anticipated post-release success (Cobbina & Bender, 2012; Friestad & Hansen, 2010) and on the other hand recidivism-studies showing high recidivism rates. While accounts during imprisonment of internal change and anticipated successful re-entry are likely genuine, they might turn out to be unrealistic in the face of the difficult circumstances after release from prison.

6.4 Implications for policy and practice
As indicated previously, recidivism and re-incarceration rates amongst formerly incarcerated women are significant, causing high societal costs. Moreover, most incarcerated women worldwide have children, and these children are likely affected by their mothers’ offending and subsequent sanctions (Dallaire et al., 2015; Elzinga & Hissel, 2010; Hissel et al., 2011). A recent study even found children of previously incarcerated parents to be at increased risk for premature mortality (Van de Weijer et al., 2018), pointing at intergenerational consequences of parental imprisonment. Following this, knowledge on the factors that contribute to women’s’ successful desistance and re-integration after release from prison is of utmost importance for policymakers and practitioners.

One of the most important findings of this dissertation is the fact that so many formerly incarcerated women experienced post-release problems related to housing, finances and drug use. A substantial number of women received an allowance for being homeless, and it is likely that even more women were in fact homeless, given that many interviewed women indicated that they did not know about the existence of such an allowance. Moreover, the majority of women who recidivated during follow-up mentioned a lack of stable housing after their release from prison; they described how they had slept on the streets, in a shelter, or at their workplace. Similarly, financial problems (most notably debts) featured in the majority of accounts, and many women received some form of income support. Lastly, most women who recidivated experienced prolonged drug problems.
Having a stable place to stay was consistently reported to be essential in the post-release context, also influencing a wide range of other outcomes such as attempts to get clean and finding a job. In the Netherlands, prisons (before release) and municipalities (after release) are obliged to enable prisoners to make sure five basic necessities are secured, namely employment, stable housing, finances and debts, a valid identity card and health insurance, a policy that corresponds to the Dutch penal climate with a focus on resocialization. However, taking care of these necessities is often time-consuming and thus difficult to accomplish, especially within the limited timeframe of the relatively short prison sentences as imposed on the women in the present sample (and to Dutch prisoners in general). As such, one could argue that even if the system is in place, women do not automatically benefit from such a system.

In order to overcome these practical problems, and to prevent women from entering a vicious circle of negative events after release, it might be beneficial to intensify aftercare for formerly incarcerated women. Moreover, the finding that so many formerly incarcerated women are in economically marginalized situations should be taken into account when imposing sentences for further offenses, especially if these offenses can be considered to be the result of the same marginalized circumstances (i.e. ‘stealing to buy food’). As imposing fines will likely aggravate the underlying problems, imposing other sanctions such as community service can be considered an alternative that limits additional negative consequences for these women.

In recent decades, policy makers and practitioners in the Netherlands have increasingly focused on the importance of specific forms of social capital, most notably employment, in relation to successful re-integration and preventing recidivism. In so doing, policy makers aimed at increasing access to employment, as it is presumed that (former) offenders will desist from crime more or less automatically after entering the workforce. Although the present findings support the notion that employment (and other social capital) is an important factor in the desistance-process, they also show that these factors are unlikely to meaningfully influence desistance in the absence of other, more subjective changes as experienced by (former) offenders. It is important for policy makers to take note of these experiences, as they were found to differentiate between on the one hand women who fared relatively well during follow-up, and on the other hand women who recidivated and faced a magnitude of other problems. More specifically, policies and programs should be designed in a way that
captures and reinforces initial motivations for change during and after prison.

That said, the current study does justify a continued focus on factors of social control, most notably employment and motherhood. Although these forms of social capital were found to be insufficient to bring about lasting change by themselves, they were found to interact with an initial motivation to change and/or to provide the women with other basic needs. As such, policy should aim at preserving social capital amongst incarcerated individuals, for example by providing resources that make it easier for women to maintain ties with their children during and after prison (e.g. free transportation to prison-visits, easily accessible support in regaining custody over children) and by helping women find meaningful and stable employment.

Lastly, one has to keep in mind that the social and internal factors described above appeared to influence desistance after women found a stable place to stay. Accordingly, housing can be considered a *conditio sine qua non*, an absolute prerequisite for the initiation of the desistance process. Only after this necessity of life was met, women were able to take advantage of other desistance-enhancing internal and social factors.

### 6.5 Limitations and agenda for future research

Although the current thesis increased our understanding of women’s pathways out of crime, many questions remain. In what follows, limitations of the current study that form the basis of future research efforts will be outlined.

First, this study relied on officially registered conviction data to examine offending after release from prison. As holds true for any study on (the absence of) offending, using this kind of data likely results in an underestimation of the number of offenses committed. As a result, it is possible that some individuals who were labelled desister were in fact persisting in (not-registered) crime.

Second, the fact that individuals were classified as either desister or persister based on subsequent offending fails to do justice to the notion that desistance should be considered a process, rather than a sudden and permanent status change, a notion that has been increasingly acknowledged within the field of criminology. Employing such a rigid distinction made it possible to examine differences between women who could be considered as either outright desisters or outrightpersisters. However, it also hampered examining more subtle differences within groups of persisters.
and desisters. For example, persisters were labelled persister irrespective of the number of post-release crimes committed. Recall that some of the interviewees were classified as persister, while they offended only once or twice during the follow-up period. Their stories matched the ones of their desisting counterparts in several respects, while they were markedly different from the ones of the persisters. Thus, it appears that there are two kinds of persisters; those who walk, stumble and walk again (and these persisters are likely the ones resembling the desisters) and those who walk, stumble and fall. These findings show how operationalizing desistance as a dichotomous, static concept increases the likelihood that individuals who are actually in the process of desistance are regarded persisters, leading to false conclusions about the effect of different variables. Thus, future research should employ creative quantitative and qualitative measures to examine the lives of individuals at different points of the desistance-persistence continuum.

Third, the women who were interviewed for the qualitative part of this study were relatively old compared to other samples of women offenders. As mentioned at the outset of this dissertation, aging is a crucial component of some of the leading criminological (desistance) theories, one that is proposed to be directly related to desistance or indirectly, for example through age-graded forms of informal social control or offending fatigue. Indeed, the quantitative results of the present study showed that the risk of offending decreased with age. Moreover, interviewees often mentioned being tired, being fed up with it, waking up realizing they were getting old, and so on, while they also described forms of informal social control in relation to their desistance efforts. The question then remains whether the same processes as found in this study would have taken place at a younger age, or whether they are in fact the result of getting older. According to a recent study, age at prison release has an influence on post-release outcomes, “as older women appear to express a reentry goal orientation that diverges from that of their younger counterparts” (Kerrison et al., 2016). Following this, a more detailed consideration of the potential age-graded processes underlying desistance seems warranted.

Fourth, although the mixed-methods design as used in this study made it possible to examine factors related to desistance while also offering insights into how these factors impacted desistance and the complex relations between different factors, it did not allow for a quantitative empirical test of both social as well as subjective factors. As a result, it is impossible to know for sure that subjective changes indeed preceded social
processes, even though both quantitative as well as qualitative findings lend support to this time-order of events. For example, it could be that the women's narratives changed as a function of time passing by. To overcome this problem of potential ‘retrospective re-imagining’, Rocque (2017, p. 144) rightfully called for more quantitative empirical examinations of the influence of subjective and social changes on desistance.

To conclude, the present study has increased knowledge on women's desistance from crime, while it also contributed to the current theoretical debate and broadened the desistance-scope as to include contextual factors as inevitable components of the desistance process. As was to be expected, the findings simultaneously raised new questions, questions that will hopefully be dealt with (at least partly) when responding to the research agenda provided in this section.