

Lund University

Department of Sociology

# From Adrenaline to Routine

## Understanding the Motivations and Key Influences for Leaving a Criminal Lifestyle



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

Author: Agnes Bjerregaard

Supervisor: Sébastien Tutenges

Master's Programme of Cultural Criminology

Thesis Dissertation: CCR20, 30 Credits

Word count: 18244

## **Abstract**

This study investigates the experiences of individuals who have left a criminal lifestyle and the factors influencing their journey. Through interviews with both individuals active in a criminal lifestyle and those who have successfully transitioned to a law-abiding life, this research explores the motivations for leaving a criminal lifestyle and the challenges faced during this process. Key findings indicate that imprisonment often serves as a significant trigger for change, providing a structured break from criminal networks and allowing individuals to reconnect with family. Family support, particularly from mothers and children, plays a crucial role in sustaining the transition away from crime. However, this thesis also highlights the difficulties encountered post-incarceration, including the struggle to replicate the stability of prison life, financial difficulties, and the challenge of reshaping one's identity. The process of leaving crime involves not just to cease with illegal activities but also undergoing a profound transformation of self-perception. The narratives reveal that while humour and family support assist in navigating this complex journey, maintaining a new, law-abiding identity requires ongoing effort and adaptation. The findings of this thesis underscore the multifaceted nature of this transition and the importance of both internal and external support systems for achieving a lasting transformation.

**Keywords:** Desistance; Identity Transformation; Prison; Family Support; Criminal Lifestyle

## **Popular science review**

The aim of this study is to understand what triggers an individual to leave a criminal lifestyle and what factors that supports the individual after leaving their previous lifestyle.

By interviewing individuals who still are engaged in, and those who have left a criminal lifestyle, this research reveals that leaving a criminal lifestyle behind is a complex process that often includes setbacks and requires strong motivation. In this study, many participants said that one reason that they left their criminal lifestyle was imprisonment. Many of the interviewed had already started questioning their criminal lifestyle before being incarcerated, but they didn't know how to take the step. For some, prison provided a way out by slowly fading out from their previous network. This separation allowed them to reconnect with their families, especially their children, and consider a different future.

Family support, particularly from mothers and children, was crucial in helping these individuals stay away from relapsing in a criminal lifestyle. Many spoke about how their mothers were a major reason for wanting to change, and fathers expressed a deep desire to be better role models for their children, despite feeling guilty for their past absences. Rebuilding these relationships became a key motivation for maintaining a law-abiding lifestyle. However, the transition was not without challenges. The structure and routine of prison life is difficult to replicate outside, and some missed the excitement of their former lives. Financial difficulties also created a problem, as finding steady, well-paying work with a criminal record is tough. For someone used to fast, easy money, the adjustment to a legal job could be frustrating.

Leaving a criminal lifestyle involves more than just stop doing illegal activities, it requires a deep change in the individual's identity. Those in this study had to rethink how they saw themselves and had to work hard to build a new sense of self, often using humour to cope with the emotional challenges of starting over. This journey is difficult, but with support and determination, it is possible to create a new, law-abiding life.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I want to say thanks to my amazing supervisor Sébastien for all the help and support during this process. Without your encouragement and insight, this thesis would not have been possible. I am incredibly grateful for everything you have done. To Erik, thank you for always caring so deeply about your students, I am fortunate to have benefited from your guidance.

To all the participants, thank you for so openly share your personal stories.

To my fellow cult crimmers, thank you for the inspiration and discussions, and a special thanks to Aske for the feedback and encouragement.

To my family, mom and dad. Thank you for endless hours of babysitting, always believing in me and teaching me everything I know. Your love, support, and the values you've taught me have been the foundation of my achievements.

To Klara, thank you for all the discussions and countless Facetime hours. Your insights and support have been invaluable, and you've been a fantastic support, always there to listen and bounce ideas with. I am deeply grateful for everything.

To Adam, my ray of sunshine. You just keep me hanging on.

## Table of Contents

|                                                                                 |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 1. Introduction .....                                                           | 1  |
| 1.1 Key terms .....                                                             | 2  |
| 2. Lit review .....                                                             | 3  |
| 2.1 Family .....                                                                | 3  |
| 2.2 Economics .....                                                             | 5  |
| 2.3 Prison.....                                                                 | 6  |
| 3. Theory.....                                                                  | 9  |
| 3.1 Becoming an ex .....                                                        | 9  |
| 3.2 Identity and Narrative.....                                                 | 10 |
| 4. Method .....                                                                 | 12 |
| 4.1 Positionality.....                                                          | 12 |
| 4.2 Data collection .....                                                       | 14 |
| 4.3 Thick description .....                                                     | 15 |
| 4.3.1 Interview with a former leader figure of a motorcycle club .....          | 15 |
| 4.3.2 Interview with an individual still involved in a criminal lifestyle ..... | 16 |
| 4.4 Analysing data .....                                                        | 17 |
| 4.5 Ethics .....                                                                | 17 |
| 5. Analysis.....                                                                | 19 |
| 5.1 The role of prison .....                                                    | 19 |
| 5.1.1 Prison as a sanctuary .....                                               | 19 |
| 5.2 The role of family .....                                                    | 24 |
| 5.2.1 Mothers and children .....                                                | 25 |
| 5.2.2 Prison and family .....                                                   | 28 |
| 5.2.3 Family and reintegration.....                                             | 30 |
| 5.3 The role of economics.....                                                  | 31 |
| 5.3.1 Debts and reintegration.....                                              | 32 |
| 5.4 Identity.....                                                               | 35 |
| 6. Conclusions .....                                                            | 39 |
| 7. References: .....                                                            | 44 |

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Sweden has seen an increase in gang criminality and the Swedish police estimate that there are around 62,000 individuals in or around the criminal networks (Polisen, 2024). This, combined with the fact that 40% relapse into crime within three years after conviction (BRÅ, 2023), there is a need to understand why someone decides to leave a criminal lifestyle. By understanding the narratives that surround the decision to move away from a criminal lifestyle and live a law-abiding life, one important factor is to gain insights into how these individuals make sense of their desistance process (Westerlund, 2021). By using a cultural criminological perspective, it provides a unique lens through which to explore these narratives, emphasising the role of symbolic and cultural meanings, emotions, and the lived experiences of those involved. This perspective differs significantly from the more traditional approaches to desistance, where desistance is seen as a part of a linear progression, often focusing on structural factors like family, childhood, and rational choice. In contrast, cultural criminology, explored by the influential scholars, like Ferrell, Hayward, and Young (2008) focuses on the symbolic and cultural dimensions of crime and desistance. It highlights how individuals construct and reconstruct their identities through interactions with the cultural and social worlds around them. This perspective views desistance not just as a result of external life events but as a deeply personal and cultural process, where the meanings attached to crime and the self are renegotiated over time. It emphasises the role of subcultural affiliations, emotions, and the aesthetics of crime, considering how these factors can both hinder and enable desistance. Using cultural criminology, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how desistance is not just about breaking away from crime but also about reforming one's identity and navigating the cultural landscape that once supported their criminal lifestyle. This approach reveals how desisters may either struggle with or embrace the cultural symbols and narratives that were once central in their life, making desistance a more complex, culturally embedded process than traditional models suggest.

By examining previous studies about desistance including factors such as the role of family, Cid & Martí (2012) and Copp et al. (2020) argues for the importance of having strong social bonds and support from the person involved in criminal lifestyles. Both when it comes to even thinking about leaving their current lifestyle and transist to a new, law-abiding lifestyle, and to maintain the new lifestyle and not relapse into their old pattern. Along with family structures and support, the individual's economical state plays an important role for maintaining the exit,

since many are struggling with debts and have a hard time to adapt into a new lifestyle with a lower income (Gålnander, 2022, Martire et. al., 2011; Harper et. al., 2021). To be able to take the step and leave their current situation Ebaugh (1988) describes how an event often is needed to take the final step and change their path, and in this thesis the role of prison is especially highlighted as the triggering event (Maruna & Roy, 2007; Bucerius et. al, 2021). Combining these themes this thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding about the underlying processes and narratives when it comes to leaving a criminal lifestyle and maintaining a law-abiding life. Through nuanced analysis and engagement with lived experiences it becomes possible to understand the narratives when it comes to leaving a criminal lifestyle, but also to better understand what kind of support a person who seeks a life beyond their criminal lifestyle needs for maintaining their exit.

My research question is:

- What triggers and sustains the process of leaving a criminal lifestyle?

## 1.1 Key terms

Central to this exploration is the concept of a ‘criminal lifestyle’. In this thesis I consistently use the word ‘criminal lifestyle’ instead of ‘criminality’, ‘criminal activities’ or other words trying to capture the concept. The reason for using ‘criminal lifestyle’ in favour of other terms is that there is no good translation to the Swedish word ‘yrkeskriminell’, which as best could be translated to ‘professional criminal’ but does not capture the essence of what I aim to convey. The term ‘criminal lifestyle’ also has the advantage that it is used as an identity-first language, which avoids stigmatising the individual’s involved in a criminal lifestyle.

The benefits of using ‘criminal lifestyle’ are that it is an ‘umbrella term’ and therefore is non-specific to what types of crimes are involved, allowing me to ask general questions about their criminal lifestyle without going into details. The subjectivity of the term also leaves the individuals themselves to identify if they have left the criminal lifestyle. Walker et. al. (2013) addresses this in their article and problematizes the concept of desistance by asking questions such as how long should someone sustain from criminality to be seen as a desistor, and what role does it have if someone engaged in a criminal lifestyle changes the type of crimes they commit? By allowing the informants to self-identify their leaving from a criminal lifestyle, I avoid the need to ask specific questions about their last criminal act, thus refraining from judging their status as desisters. This approach is crucial since the process of leaving a

criminal lifestyle often is non-linear but keeps on negotiating back and forth until the individual finally has landed in their decision (Ebaugh, 1988).

## 2. Lit review

In this chapter, I will present research that is relevant to gain a deeper understanding about the thesis subject. I will begin by exploring three major themes, the role of family, economics and prison, which all provide a deeper understanding of what triggers and sustains the process of leaving a criminal lifestyle. Given the focus of my research question and the emphasis on turning points, which means the final reason that made the individual involved in a criminal lifestyle to take the step and leave their current lifestyle and searching for a new, law-abiding lifestyle and identity, these themes will provide a comprehensive perspective on the key factors shaping an individual's choice to leave a criminal lifestyle.

### 2.1 Family

The role of family is one of the key factors to successfully leave a criminal lifestyle. It could either be emotional support from family or when family ties act as 'turning points' for the individual when they want to desist from a criminal lifestyle (Cid & Martí, 2012; Copp et al., 2020, Walker et al., 2012). Drawing from Maruna's (2001) ideas about turning points and identity shifts (or cognitive transformation), Cid and Martí (2012) highlights the fact that to successfully leave a criminal lifestyle after the turning point, the individual needs the support from their families in order to maintain their new lifestyle (Cid and Martí, 2012). Some of the aspects that Cid and Martí (2012) addresses in their article gets support from Copp et al., (2020), who also highlight the importance of family relations while desisting from a criminal lifestyle. In addition, Copp et al., (2020) addresses the fact that key adult experiences such as marriage are not the only reasons for an individual involved in a criminal lifestyle to desist, and points to how young adults get married later in life. Their findings point to the fact that even after considering factors like marriage and identity changes, receiving support from their parents and reducing time spent with friends involved in a criminal lifestyle leads to a decrease in the individual's own criminal activity. The findings conclude that family and peer relationships play a significant role in the desistance process and that it is important to see at

both the individual and the social factors in order to encourage long-lasting changes in leaving a criminal lifestyle (Copp et al., 2020). On that note Savolainen (2009) explores the age-graded theory which says that individuals ‘grows out of crime’ when they get married or find a steady job. In one way they acknowledge how these key factors are important since they in themselves hinders the individuals from committing crimes – having a steady job means that one has to get up in the morning to be efficient at work and stay away from activities that keeps one from doing their job, and having a family means responsibility and other priorities in life as well as someone who is monitoring them not to drink, gamble or engage in high-risk activities. Savolainen (2009) also points out that it is often not a big event leading up to a turning point which make someone to leave their criminal lifestyle, rather than “a consequence of a series of short-term decisions and events” and backs this statement with Samson and Laub’s (2003) research on the matter of age and life events to be involved in or desist from a criminal lifestyle. Savolainen (2009) takes these results and puts them in a Finnish context where the welfare state is relatively strong and it is more common to live in a cohabiting relationship for a longer period of time before marriage (if they marry at all) and shows that “recidivists, transition to cohabitation is associated with greater reductions in criminal activity than getting married.”. He also states that for marriage a convicted felon early on in the relationship typically shows a more permissive view on criminal activities from the spouses (Savolainen, 2009). When it comes to becoming a parent and still being engaged in a criminal lifestyle it differs a lot depending on the cultural environment and country, stating that in Finland where the welfare state is strong and there are a universal and generous benefits for parents with young children, becoming a parent is a key factor to desist from a criminal lifestyle (Savolainen, 2009). Given the fact that Savolainens (2009) study is conducted in a welfare state, the findings are particularly interesting for understanding and analysing the results, since the data in the thesis is collected and analysed from, and within a Swedish context.

Family support, whether emotional or practical, can act as a turning point that triggers the decision to desist from crime. Cid and Martí (2012) points out that, after a turning point, continued family support is essential for maintaining a new, law-abiding lifestyle. Copp et al. (2020) reinforce this idea, showing that while factors like marriage are often seen as key reasons for desistance, strong family ties and reducing time spent with friends engaged in criminal activities are just as crucial. The research also incorporates Savolainen's (2009) findings, which also highlights the importance of turning points.

## 2.2 Economics

Being involved in a criminal lifestyle often entails financial difficulties. This includes reasons why someone may choose to engage in criminal activities, as well as being burdened with debt, due to fines or incarceration, ultimately resulting in an inability to pay bills (Aaltonen, 2016; Sampson & Laub, 1997; Harper et al., 2020). Harper et al. (2020) research how debt affects incarcerated individuals seeking to transition away from criminality. Within a criminal justice system that puts individuals in debt through legal financial obligations (LFOs) which often are so high that they are unpayable. Long-term financial difficulties and high debts causes a snowball effect when inability to pay off the debts leads to more reliance on the social system and often that the individual takes costly loans with predatory interest rates and results in a harder time to reenter the society (Harper et al., 2020).

Gålnander (2022) takes the question about debts and desistance and puts it in a Swedish context. Debts in general are widespread over the households since Sweden are one of the most indebted in the world and differs from other countries in the legal system where the fines are relatively low and an individual who gets sentence only has to pay for their own lawyer and not the other legal costs, even though a high number of the individuals in prison are deep in debts from ‘punishment debts’ (Gålnander, 2022). However, debts are often a burden for the one who is trying to leave a criminal lifestyle and hinders them in desistance and can be a cause for an individual to stay in criminality and “substantial debt can lock desisters out of the mainstream, limiting their options or indeed even hopes for a different life.” (Gålnander, 2022). And even though debt is widespread in the nation, the issue comes to when the financial problems become a debt default and the bills remain unpaid. Both private sectors and governmental institutions have legal mechanisms to keep records of payment notes and collect money and/or property from individuals who haven’t been able to pay their overdue debts (Aaltonen, 2016; Djankov et al., 2008). Having unpaid debts and payment notes leads to prolonged consequences such as loss of credit rating, but also problems with renting an apartment, getting a phone contract, and getting some types of jobs or insurance (Aaltonen, 2016). Gålnander (2020) addresses this fact by referring to Rouzbehi et al. (2016) that says that “convicted people meant that the real punishment happened after release from prison, when they tried to turn their lives around and pay off their debts in crippling poverty”. For someone who in their criminal life is used to making quick money, no matter the sum of it, the transition to a law-abiding life becomes fragile if they stay unemployed or have to depend on

social welfare support. Even if they manage to get a job, the debts remain and leave them on subsistence level for several years to come.

Being involved in a criminal lifestyle often leads to significant financial challenges, including debt from legal fines or incarceration. Harper et al. (2020) examine how such debts, exacerbated by legal financial obligations (LFOs) that are often unmanageable, can hinder individuals trying to transition away from crime. Long-term financial difficulties result in reliance on social systems and predatory loans, complicating the reentry into society. In a Swedish context, Gålnander (2022) notes that while Sweden's fines are relatively low compared to other countries, many individuals still face substantial debt from legal costs, which can hinder their efforts to desist from a criminal lifestyle. Widespread debt in Sweden can lock individuals out of mainstream opportunities, such as renting an apartment or securing employment. This constant debt can make the transition to a law-abiding life particularly challenging, as the financial burden and the resulting effects can preserve poverty and limit the options for starting a new life.

## 2.3 Prison

One of the foreseeable consequences of engaging in criminal activities and living a criminal lifestyle is the potential for being sentenced to prison time someday. Many scholars have focused on the pain prison entails and how life in prison aggravates transitions to a life outside the walls and to live a crime-free life, stating that time in prison causes psychological damage and institutionalisation (Haney, 2001). In Sweden, and the other Scandinavian countries the approach to incarceration differs from the rest of the world, something Pratt (2008) called 'Scandinavian exceptionalism', meaning that the Scandinavian countries have a history of low prison rates and relatively human conditions inside the prisons. This trend has, according to Pratt (2008) shifted and the penal system now has the same tendencies as the rest of the world, with less trust in experts and the government. Tendencies that in other countries have formed a stricter penal policy and form values of "intolerance, social exclusion and populist punitivity." (Hornqvist, 2012). The main difficulties regarding prisons and the painfulness of being inside the walls are primarily the psychological damages, stigmatisation, dysfunctional adaptations and the challenges of reintegration into society post-release. Psychological damage can manifest in various forms, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Haney (2003) highlights that the deprivation of autonomy,

the oppressive nature of prisons, and the constant threat of violence can severely affect inmates' mental health. Long-term imprisonment often leads to institutionalisation, where individuals become so used to the structured life in prison, that they struggle to function in the outside world. This phenomenon, described by Goffman (1961), indicates a loss of independence and a diminished capacity to make decisions, which are crucial for successful reintegration into society after finishing their sentence.

Stigmatisation also plays a significant role in the difficulties faced by former inmates. The stigma associated with having a criminal record can lead to social exclusion and discrimination in various aspects of life, such as employment, housing, and personal relationships (Copp et. al., 2020). According to Uggen et. al, (2004), employers are often reluctant to hire individuals with criminal records, perpetuating a cycle of unemployment and economic instability. The discrimination extends to housing, where landlords may refuse to rent to former prisoners, further hindering their reintegration efforts (Aaltonen, 2016). As previously mentioned under 2.1 the social stigma can affect personal relationships, causing estrangement from family and friends who might fear association with the individual previously involved in a criminal lifestyle or view the individual as a permanent threat (Western, 2006). The combination of these factors can lead to a sense of hopelessness and frustration, increasing the likelihood of recidivism. As former inmates struggle to re-establish their lives, they may find themselves returning to a criminal lifestyle as a means of survival, and by that repeat the cycle of incarceration.

However, despite the negative consequences of imprisonment Bucerius et al., (2021) points to how prisons could offer marginalised individuals a temporary respite and how prison could, for some, serve as a refuge from the chaotic and dangerous conditions out on the street. Imprisonment also has the advantage that it provides a structured environment and makes sure that every individual has access to basic needs such as a place to sleep, food, and basic healthcare. For those who are involved in a criminal lifestyle, prison could offer a period of order, safety and stability, away from the constant stress and threats that otherwise characterise their life on the outside (Bucerius et. al., 2021). Prison also has the advantage that it could provide an opportunity for reflection and personal growth. Bucerius et. al. (2021) points out that some inmates use their time in prison to distance themselves from negative influences and rethink their life choices. The period of calm can be crucial for individuals who, in their past lifestyle, have been living a life in a state of constant crisis, and

imprisonment and the structure of prisons allows them to regain a sense of control which helps them to consider alternative lifestyles.

Swedish prisons require the inmates to engage in work, study or therapy programs designed to challenge pro-criminal thoughts and encourage personal reflection. These programs not only promote reconsideration of criminal behaviour, but also provide individuals with new skills and qualifications that are valuable for living a law-abiding life after release (Western, 2006; Davis et. al., 2013).

Prison presents significant challenges and opportunities for individuals transitioning away from a criminal lifestyle. Research highlights the harmful effects of imprisonment, including psychological damage such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Haney, 2003). Long-term imprisonment often leads to institutionalisation, where individuals struggle with reintegration due to a loss of independence and decision-making abilities (Goffman, 1961). Additionally, the stigma associated with a criminal record can lead to social exclusion and discrimination in employment, housing, and personal relationships, perpetuating a cycle of recidivism (Copp et al., 2020; Uggen et al., 2004; Aaltonen, 2016). Despite these challenges, prison can also offer a structured environment and a temporary reprieve from the chaos of street life. Bucerius et al. (2021) note that imprisonment can provide safety, stability, and an opportunity for personal reflection, allowing individuals to distance themselves from negative influences and consider alternative lifestyles. Swedish prisons, in particular, require inmates to participate in work, study, or therapy programs designed to foster personal growth and prepare for reintegration into society (Western, 2006; Davis et al., 2013).

The exploration of prison's role in the desistance process reveals both the triggers and sustaining factors for leaving a criminal lifestyle. The psychological and social challenges of incarceration, including institutionalisation and stigma, often make the transition to a law-abiding life difficult. However, the structured environment and opportunities for personal reflection and skill development offered by prisons, particularly in the Swedish context, can also play a crucial role in facilitating desistance. Understanding these dual aspects provides insight into how prison experiences influence the decision to leave and sustain a new, law-abiding lifestyle.

### 3. Theory

In this chapter I will present theories that are relevant to get a deeper understanding about the thesis subject. Starting with Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh's (1988) prominent book 'Becoming an ex' to get a better understanding of the process of leaving an identity and lifestyle, and becoming an ex. Then I use Shadd Marunas' (2011) book 'Making good' which focuses on how ex-convicts make sense of their previous life and how they rebuild their life to live law-abiding. Since my research question focuses on the process of leaving a criminal lifestyle it is highly relevant to understand how the exit process works, as well as the exit processes in general, as for those who are abandoning a criminal life.

#### 3.1 Becoming an ex

An individual's lifestyle is a part of their identity, and to be willing to change that identity to something else and new takes a lot of effort, still many change their lifestyle and transform their life many times in their life. Helen Rose Ebaugh (1988) points out that the process of becoming an ex consists of four stages. The first stage in the process of leaving is questioning the current role. Doubting that if the current life and role is something worth the cost of commitment. Ebaugh (1988) points out that this stage often is influenced by dissatisfaction and a first encounter to reflect about what is missing in their life. Ebaugh also stresses that some remain in this stage and never exit, and for others it could take years before they move on to the next stage, and of course, for some it only takes a couple of months until they enter the next stage (Ebaugh, 1988:41).

The second stage is searching for alternatives to their current situation (Ebaugh, 1988). By investigating which alternatives that are available and the pros and cons of entering these the individual comes closer to a final decision to leave (ibid). To realise that their current role isn't permanent, and that the individual has a freedom of choice of what would happen after their leaving, or that they have their own agency to decide and control their life (Ebaugh, 1988, Redondo et. al., 2022). An important part for this stage is the social support (Ebaugh, 1988, Redondo et. al., 2022). After searching for alternatives, a new identity and reaching a decision that it is worth leaving their current situation, the third stage is the turning point, where they exit (Ebaugh, 1988). This step is often triggered by a specific event, either something significant or something more trivial, if it is something trivial Ebaugh means that the event becomes symbolic (ibid). Another way that triggers the exit is a build-up effect, after

a long time thinking about leaving the individual suddenly had enough and decides that it is time to exit (Ebaugh, 1988). No matter what triggered the final decision to leave, an important part is to announce for other people that the individual has reformed their identity. After this the individual often finds themselves in a 'vacuum-stage' where they can experience feelings of shock or numbness to their new situation. That they don't belong to either their previous identity or fully have adapted to their new one (Ebaugh, 1988). If the individual has social support from others, it is easier to adapt to their new role, however, if they don't, the emotional aspects are often filled with anxiety and self-doubt (ibid). The final step according to Ebaugh is the creation of the ex-role, and how the individual forms their new identity in relation to their old one. They have to reform their social obligations and norms which can cause a 'hangover-identity' where they still have residuals from their previous role and can struggle to find their way in the new role and identity (Ebaugh, 1988:149,156). Depending on which role they had before Ebaugh says that some roles that are socially desirable such as going from convict to ex-convict, even though these types of role-exits face negative societal reactions and stigma based on their previous identities (Ebaugh, 1988:158).

### 3.2 Identity and Narrative

The transition from a criminal lifestyle to an ex-criminal identity is a complex and multifaceted process that requires individuals to construct a coherent self-narrative. According to Maruna (2011), this narrative helps individuals "make sense" of their past behaviours, combining them with their present selves, and create a vision for their future. Developing a prosocial and coherent identity is crucial for an individual who seeks desistance from a criminal lifestyle, as it allows them to understand and integrate their past actions within a framework that supports their reformed identity (Maruna, 2011:9). Maruna's theory emphasises that identity transformation involves more than just a change in behaviour. It requires a deep internal shift in how the individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world. This process often includes acknowledging the reasons behind their past lifestyle, and recognising the changes they have undergone, and committing to a new law-abiding identity. This transformation is essential for sustaining desistance, as it provides a stable foundation for building a new life.

However, desistance is influenced by a range of factors beyond individual mindset and effort. Katz (1988) highlights the importance of moral emotions, such as shame, guilt, and pride, in understanding why individuals choose to engage in and maintain a criminal lifestyle. These

emotions play a crucial role in giving actions a subjective meaning, contributing to the pursuit of excitement and status through criminality. While Katz does not directly address desistance or the process of leaving a criminal lifestyle, the same emotions can also be instrumental in understanding why someone might choose to exit that lifestyle. For example, feelings of guilt and shame about past actions can lead to self-reflection and a desire for change. Maruna (2011) argues that such moral emotions, along with external factors like financial stability and employment opportunities, can be key motivators in the formation of a new, reformed identity. Maruna (2011) identifies several key factors necessary for ex-convicts to successfully reform and rebuild their lives. Central to this is the concept of turning points, which are pivotal moments or events that facilitate the shift away from criminal behaviour. These turning points can include significant life changes such as finding a steady job after release from prison, entering into a stable romantic relationship, or becoming a parent (Laub et. al, 2003; Maruna, 2011). These experiences not only provide motivation to distance oneself from a criminal past but also require a reformation of the identity, as they require the individuals to adopt new roles and responsibilities. Giordano et al. (2002) provide empirical evidence supporting the importance of turning points in the desistance process. Their research shows that these moments of change can act as catalysts for identity transformation, encouraging individuals to reevaluate their lives and make a conscious decision to find a different path (Maruna, 2011; Giordano et al., 2002). For example, finding steady employment can provide a sense of purpose and financial stability, while entering a stable relationship can offer emotional support and a sense of belonging. Becoming a parent can bring a sense of responsibility and a desire to provide a better future for the child. The complex nature of these turning points is crucial to understanding the desistance process. Maruna (2011) points out that for some individuals, the transformation from living a criminal lifestyle to an ex-criminal identity can be a clear-cut, crucial change, marked by a specific event or realisation. For others, it is a slower, more subtle process, where the individual “gets tired” of their lifestyle, and the shift involves a series of small changes and realisations over time. This variability underscores the importance of considering individual differences and contextual factors in the desistance process.

Contextual factors such as social networks, access to rehabilitation programs, and financial stability play significant roles in shaping the course of an individual's desistance journey. A supportive social network can provide emotional support, guidance, and practical assistance, while access to rehabilitation programs can offer education, training, and therapeutic support.

Financial stability can reduce the pressure to engage in criminal activities and provide the resources needed to build a new life. As individuals navigate this transformation process, they often experience deeper shifts in their self-image and life purpose. This ongoing evolution of identity reinforces their commitment to their new, law-abiding life, making the change more sustainable (Maruna, 2011). These shifts might involve an individual re-evaluating their values, goals, and aspirations, and developing a sense of purpose that is aligned with a law-abiding identity. By understanding the interplay between personal narratives, turning points, and moral emotions is crucial for understanding the desistance process and supporting the individuals in their journey towards their new identity.

Another important factor in the identity transformation is the sense of humour. Bergson (1911) describes how both laughter and humour can be a form of critique against their previous identity and can be used when talking about their previous lifestyle and “in fact, there may be few other options but to laugh when somebody throws a bewilderingly sad story at you.” (Tutenges, 2022). This ability to laugh at one’s past may be instrumental in the ongoing process of reshaping identity and committing to a new, law-abiding life.

## 4. Method

As previously mentioned, my thesis aims to understand what triggers and sustains the process of leaving a criminal lifestyle and is carried out by a qualitative approach. Therefore, I have conducted in-depth interviews with people in and around criminal lifestyles as well as two police officers. To give an idea of my method I’ve used thick descriptions for two of my interviews, which will be further explained in the next chapter. Due to the sensitive matter of the subject, I will elaborate on the ethical considerations and how I managed to describe my interlocutors with the title they wanted and still were able to keep their anonymity. This thesis is focused in and within a Swedish context, all of the participants are male and in the ages between 20-60.

### 4.1 Positionality

When conducting the interviews I had my main set of themes and various questions to gain as much information so I would be able to finally answer my research question. One of the themes was about background and family. However, no matter what theme I was asking

questions about we kept on coming back to family. Even when my questions were not directly related to any family-oriented areas, the discussion often steered in that direction. I believe this recurring focus on family was less about my participants constantly thinking about their family situations and more related to my positionality as an interviewer. First of all, as a woman it would not be surprising if my appearance or demeanour made the participants think about more “soft values”, such as relationships and emotional aspects of life. I was also clear before starting the interviews that I was not interested in discussing crimes committed. This statement likely positioned me as someone less interested in “hard values” or the toughness of the street, which may further have influenced the directions of our conversations. Some of the participants also knew beforehand that I have a child, something which also could have affected the interview outcome and our discussions. If I would have been a middle-aged man the discussions probably would have been different, and about other topics. But being a 20-something woman, who from the start said that I did not want to hear about acts that they normally would highlight as a way to impress or position themselves as, the interviews instead focused on relationships and emotions surrounding their families. As a Swedish woman, and a university student, my social and cultural position inevitably influence how I approach and interpret my research. My background gives me certain privileges and biases that may shape the way I understand and engage with the experiences of the individuals in this research. Coming from an academic environment and a particular cultural context, I recognise that there are aspects of the participants lives and perspective that I may not fully grasp or may unconsciously overlook. Being immersed in Swedish society, and not myself being actively engaged in criminal activities, I might take for granted certain social norms, values, and structures that influence how I perceive the narratives shared by the participants. This could potentially create a blind spot in my research, where I may miss subtle cues, cultural nuances, or alternative interpretations that are significant to those with different life experiences or backgrounds than my own. Furthermore, as someone who has not personally experienced a criminal lifestyle, there may be elements of this lived reality that I find challenging to fully comprehend, despite my best efforts to approach the subject with empathy and openness.

I am aware that my positionality might lead me to interpret the data in ways that reflect my own cultural and academic frameworks, potentially shaping the conclusions I draw. To mitigate these limitations, I have made a conscious effort to engage with diverse perspectives and to remain reflexive throughout the research process, questioning my assumptions and

seeking to understand the participants' experiences as authentically as possible. However, I acknowledge that my interpretations are inevitably filtered through my own lens, and this awareness is a crucial part of my approach to the research.

## 4.2 Data collection

For this thesis I have conducted interviews with ten participants, all male and in the ages 20-60 years old. Two participants work as police officers in medium-sized cities in Sweden. Six of the participants have been engaged in a criminal lifestyle and two participants are still active in a criminal lifestyle. I had previous knowledge about an individual who had been engaged in a criminal lifestyle and changed their lifestyle a couple of years ago. Through him I got referred to others who had a similar background and were therefore using a snowball sampling (Harding, 2014). To that I also used purposive sampling, reaching out to individuals who spoke publicly about their experiences of a criminal lifestyle, unfortunately some did not respond, and others could not find the time. However, two respondents agreed to participate, and are two of the ten interviewees in this thesis. The participants who work as police officers were directly approached and selected through purposive sampling and were asked if they wanted to participate in the study.

The interviews were conducted both in person and through online video meetings and all of the interviews were held in Swedish. The interviews were semi-structured with only a handful of topic areas. It was important for me that the interviews would be easy-going and that the participants had the possibility to speak freely about their life. To gain their trust before entering questions about more sensitive subjects I started out with open and more general questions as a way to make them think about their life and experiences, but without directions from me, thereby drawing from Brookman et al. (2011) which points to how open-ended questions can encourage the participants to reflect more deeply on their experiences and therefore provide more authentic, unfiltered responses. This approach allows the conversation to flow naturally, enabling the interviewer to gather rich, detailed narratives while minimising the risk of influencing the participants' responses. My topic areas were firstly background, such as their childhood and first encounter with criminal activities, secondly, life in criminality, thirdly, second thoughts about the lifestyle and turning points and finally, exiting crime and life afterwards (ibid). For those interviews that I needed more answers, or I wanted to understand some points better, I prepared some follow-up questions, and we met again to

clarify these topics, which according to Luker (2008) is important because it allows for deeper exploration and a more nuanced understanding of the interviewee's experiences.

The pros about using interviews when collecting data for a qualitative study is the possibility to get a deeper understanding and having the option to ask how and why someone acts, reacts, and thinks. By using semi-structured interviews, it gave me the ability to have an open and natural conversation but still had the main topics to rely on if the answers would go too far away from the research question. It was really useful to conduct semi-structured interviews because in this way I was able to understand both the overall context and then zoom in on the things interesting for my research. On the other hand, by using semi-structured interviews it is difficult to replicate the study since the variables involved in the interviewer-participant interaction, as well as the nuances of the interview setting. (Renton, 2012)

### 4.3 Thick description

In conducting the interviews for this study, I choose to use a thick description approach to capture the richness and depth of the participants' narrative and experiences. Further down I will exemplify the application of thick description by giving detailed insights from the interview settings and a feeling from two of the interviews. The first example was conducted with a former leader of a motorcycle club and presented some challenges in terms of place to meet and later on how to address him and still reach up to the confidentiality requirements. The second interview was conducted with someone who still is engaged in a criminal lifestyle. That interview was shorter than the others but still provided a lot of insights about the difficulties of leaving a criminal life.

#### 4.3.1 Interview with a former leader figure of a motorcycle club

I started out by writing to him on messenger and asked if he wanted to be interviewed and told him briefly about the study. He agreed and we decided a date to meet, but not place. It was important for me that he would feel comfortable and that he would be able to speak freely about his life before. The day before our meeting he suggested that we should meet at a café. That was something my teacher strongly advised against since it could disturb the interview and compromise the anonymity. So, instead I booked a room at the university's library, and asked him if we could meet there, and he agreed. So far, so good.

On the day of the interview, an hour before our appointed time I got a text message from him, asking me why I didn't want to meet him at a café as he suggested. He wrote that he had been interviewed several times before and every time the students suggested meeting at the university's library. He then explained why he wanted to meet at a café, and that he would feel more comfortable there and it would feel easier for him if I needed to go through my questions. His tone was direct but not rude, more wondering why we couldn't meet at a place he chose. I replied to him the reasons I had for meeting in a more private location and that it was important to keep the anonymity, but if he felt more relaxed to meet me at a café, we should definitely have our interview there. I used Luker's 'ignore 50 percent-rule', which means ignore half of what anyone in authority tells you and didn't do as my teacher wanted me to and one hour later, we met at the café (Luker, 2008:200). The café had music playing in the background, something that disturbed the recording a bit, but overall, it felt like the interview went on and that my interviewee could speak freely.

I had my themes prepared as described in the previous chapter which made the conversation feel more natural and open (Brookman et al., 2011). After the first interview I kept contact with my interviewee and met him for a walk and some follow-up questions to clarify some things that I needed to be able to answer the research question.

#### 4.3.2 Interview with an individual still involved in a criminal lifestyle

I got in contact with the individual through another individual I interviewed for this thesis. At first, he hesitated to be a part of the thesis but after I explained the research question and that there would not be any questions about previous committed or current involvement in crimes he agreed. As in all the interviews, it was highly important that my interviewee felt safe and comfortable to talk about his life, without being interrupted or having other people around that might disturb. After many roads back and forth we finally agreed on meeting up for a walk-along interview, we met on (one of the few) February days where the sun actually was out and after getting consent to record our conversation, I connected small microphones on both of us and started the recording. The conversation started easily, and it felt like we had a good conversation flowing. During the interview my interviewee kept on telling "funny" anecdotes about serious and (in my opinion) traumatic experiences. When I asked about how he could so easily talk about these events with such distance and humour, his appearance changed, and he got more reserved and shorter in his answer. I explained my question further, and tried to not

be accusatory, but curious, and in the blink of an eye the same, easy-going person was back. It was obvious that I touched a sensitive spot. The interview went on for another 30 minutes or so, and I managed to go through all of my themes. What struck me the most was that some of the reasons why someone chose to leave a criminal lifestyle, also was the reason why someone still was engaged in it. They had the same argument such as “it is the best for the family (right now)”, even though many of the arguments for staying in a criminal lifestyle were highly focused on themselves, and a more fatalistic worldview. After the first interview we met a couple of weeks later to clear up some questions.

#### 4.4 Analysing data

When I conducted all the interviews, it was time to transcribe. From the preparations of the interview topics, I was able to identify the narratives when my participants described their patterns and motifs related to turning points and (potentially) leaving a criminal lifestyle. I did this by systematically colour-coding the data based on the content of the narratives and focusing on the key topics (Sandberg, 2022). Then I analysed the coded data to identify specific themes from the narratives, such as the role of family, the role of economics and identity. Throughout the process of analysing the data, it was important for me to pay attention to each participant’s unique perspectives and experiences, for example comparing their narratives to identify similarities or differences (Sandberg, 2022).

#### 4.5 Ethics

Ethical considerations have been a constant during this thesis. In qualitative research the ethics are the most important part, and especially when it comes to in-depth interviews regarding former criminals and their emotions around leaving their previous life (Bryman, 2018).

That is one reason why I chose to do semi-structured interviews, so that the participants could feel some form of flexibility to talk about the subjects that surrounded their turning points. To make sure that I followed the ethical guidelines I started my contact with every participant by introducing them to my research topic and then asked if they wanted to talk to me about their experiences. Both in my first contact and right before conducting the interviews I informed them that they could cancel the interview and that they had the possibility to not answer my

questions (Bryman, 2018). I also gave them the opportunity to read through my final analysis in order to make sure that I understood them correctly and that they felt comfortable to be portrayed in my final result. In that way I feel that I reached the information requirements. Before every interview I asked the participants if they agreed to be interviewed and recorded, that's how I reached the consent requirement (ibid).

To reach the confidentiality requirement and keep my informants anonymous I needed the right equipment. So, I talked to my teacher who recommended that I use an old iPhone and never connect to the internet with it. In that way I could make sure that my recordings were kept safe and anonymous from others. My first thought was to use a Dictaphone but was advised not to since there was a possibility that if I lost it someone could just press play and then had access to all my material. So, instead I used the recorder in the iPhone and could make sure that only I had access and were able to keep the confidential requirement. Even though I had a solution to keep the material anonymous, one participant said it felt safer to not be recorded at all, which put higher demands on me, nevertheless, I respected their preference and ensured that their anonymity and privacy were maintained throughout the process (Renton, 2012). After transcription I deleted the recordings, and I will only use the collected material for this thesis (Bryman, 2018).

Another way of keeping the confidentiality was that I asked my participants how they wanted to be referred to. Mostly this was easy, such as 'former criminal' or 'police officer'. I discussed with my participants how they would like to be referred to, and even though the American Psychological Association (n.d) recommended researchers to use 'person-first language' or 'identity-first language', I opted to address the participants according to their individual preferences. However, addressing the former leader of the motorcycle gang presented a greater challenge due to the need for discretion and confidentiality. Unlike the other participants, where details about their background were more straightforward, such as 'former criminal' where it didn't matter for either me to answer the thesis question or them, I faced challenges when discussing his involvement with the motorcycle gang. While he wished to underscore the significance of the club, I still needed to formulate it without specific information who could potentially identify him or the club he was involved in.

Navigating this balance required careful consideration. I struggled with the dilemma of how to keep my participants' anonymity intact as well as honour his request and capture the essence of his experiences. I asked my supervisor for advice and in agreement with the participant we agreed on referring to him as "former leader figure of a motorcycle gang". This

collaborative approach ensured that his narrative could be shared while still respecting his privacy and reaching up to the confidentiality of sensitive information.

## 5. Analysis

In this chapter, I will present and analyse my results from the interviews with people who are or have been involved in a criminal lifestyle and what they say are the key factors that are needed to trigger and sustain the exit from a criminal lifestyle. I will present my result in four chapters, first the role of prison, the role of family, the role of economics, and finally identity. These are the factors that are the most prominent in my data. Even though they are overlapping, and it is hard to separate one from the other categories, I choose to do so in order to be able to look at them one by one for the sake of clarity. For example, the role of prison very much overlaps with the role of family, since many of those I interviewed reconnected with their families in prison. The role of family is also present in every chapter, since the responsibilities for the individuals' families seems to be one of the most prominent factors in their lives.

### 5.1 The role of prison

Previous research has explored the multifaceted experiences of individuals facing prison sentences. Most prison research shows that prison has a negative effect on the individual. Many scholars highlight the psychological damage and challenges to reintegrate in society after their time spent in prison, pointing to how prison makes it possible for a young person to gain new contacts and increase their criminal capital, dragging them even further down in the criminal lifestyle. However, a few studies, including Bucerius et al. (2021) note that despite the fact that prisons are an undesirable place to be in, it can offer marginalised individuals a temporary rest, since life on the outside is so stressful. My research backs up this line of research.

#### 5.1.1 Prison as a sanctuary

"I never wanted to go to prison, but it was like a way to just put a stop to everything. And that was exactly what I needed." - Robin

Not many can say that they want to go to prison. But if one is engaged in a criminal lifestyle, it is almost inevitable to spend at least some time inside the prison walls. In the same moment that an individual involved in a criminal lifestyle faces his sentence, they also gain increased criminal capital (Bayer et.al., 2009). Being sentenced shows to others in a criminal lifestyle that they are someone who has committed criminal acts, thus demonstrating what they are capable of, and also shows their honour when serving their sentence. The increased criminal capital can be valuable for the others involved in a criminal lifestyle to have a person on the inside, who can establish new contacts and thereby expand and recruit new individuals. However, it's worth remembering that when an individual is sentenced to prison, they are also excluded. From the perspective of criminal gangs, or the life on the streets one may then be discounted, no longer useful to them and no longer serving any function. This subtraction from their ordinary life can in turn work as a positive force. They get forced into order and security. As Robin's quote above indicates, although he didn't want to go to prison, once he was there, it provided him with a way to step away from the chaos of the streets. The safety, order, and routines within the prison offered a stabilising element in his otherwise turbulent life. During my interviews I found it surprising how positive my interlocutors felt toward the prisons and their sentences.

"It's a protected environment in there, it's safe and secure. Everything is provided for you. If you live a life with enemies and are constantly afraid of having to shoot someone and get a life sentence or die yourself, it's pretty damn safe to get a drug sentence and be away for about a year, you know." - Johan

Johan's quote offers an interesting perspective on prison as a kind of sanctuary, which connects to broader ideas about desistance from crime. Maruna (2011) argues that desistance isn't just about stop being involved in criminal activities, it is about a deeper shift in identity, and a process that can be helped by environments that offer a break from the chaos of their daily life. In Johans case, prison provides that break. Inside the walls, he's protected from the

dangers and unpredictability of life on the outside. The strict routine and predictability of prison life give him a stability that is often missing in the lives of those involved in a criminal lifestyle. This view of prison as a sanctuary ties into Maruna's (2011) idea that desistance is often triggered by significant life changes, something he calls "turning points." For some, prison can be one of those turning points, not necessarily because of the punishment, but because it offers a space for reflection and a chance to step away from the life on the outside. For Johan, the prison's protective environment allows him to temporarily escape the stress and dangers of his past lifestyle. The routine, where "everything is served," is a big contrast to the constant stress and threat of violence outside. This time away can be crucial for self-reflection, giving him a chance to rethink his life choices and start building a new identity, an idea central to Maruna's theory of desistance. Maruna (2011) suggests that desistance involves not just stop with the criminal lifestyle, but creating a new, prosocial and law-abiding identity. This process often starts with making sense of past behaviours and integrating them into a new understanding of oneself. In prison, where there are fewer external pressures, someone like Johan might find the mental space to start this work. The predictability and order of prison life, which Johan describes almost like "a vacation," could provide the calm needed for this deep reflection. The lack of outside responsibilities, whether it is social or financial, can lead to a focus on the self, which can be both good and bad. On the positive side, it might encourage the kind of self-reflection needed for identity change. But on the downside, it might also isolate him from the support networks he will need to maintain his desistance after release. Maruna (2011) emphasises that desistance isn't just about internal change, it's also about building and keeping positive relationships that support a life free from criminal activities. The role of family, friends, and community becomes crucial once someone leaves prison. While prison might provide a temporary sanctuary, the real challenge comes after release, when they have to reintegrate into society. As Maruna (2011) points out, the new narratives people create in prison need to be backed by real opportunities and positive relationships outside. Without that support, the risk of relapsing back into crime is high, as it can be tough to hold on to a new identity in the face of old pressures. Johan's experience shows how prison can be a turning point in the desistance process, offering a space for the kind of identity work Maruna (2011) describes. But it also highlights the need for ongoing support after release, to help sustain the changes that start inside. Prison might offer a temporary break from the chaos of the criminal lifestyle, but long-term desistance requires continued support and opportunities to build a new life in the community. The high focus on the self is an inevitable consequence of how the prisons are formed today, desperately wanting

the individuals inside to take responsibility for the acts they committed so that even those who wants to leave their criminal lifestyle gets drilled into having this hyperfocus on themselves, and when they do that, it is viewed as a success. However, another reason that they think and resonate like this about their time spent in prison could be because of the hardship of life outside prison. As Johan quote above pointed to, he lived a life where he feared for his life almost constantly. He also feared ending up in a situation where he, in order to protect himself, had to defend himself and shoot someone else. In another interview with an individual who went through an exit-program, this was the trigger that finally made him leave his criminal lifestyle. He was the victim of an assassination attempt and knew that either he had to leave directly, or he needed to retaliate. Knowing that he couldn't live with murdering another person he sought help from a friend's friend to get the help he needed to completely leave the environment he was in and in extend, his criminal lifestyle, this is a typical turning point as Maruna (2011) describes it.

The structure and safety of the prison environment can provide individuals with an unexpected opportunity to pause, breathe, and reflect on their life choices - something that is often difficult to achieve in the chaos of life outside. Within the walls of the prison, where external distractions are minimised, inmates can find the time and space necessary to revalue their lives.

"You find peace in prison. That's the best thing I can say about the correctional system: you get routines and a sense of calm. You can exercise and eat healthily, and it really makes a difference inside as well." - Robin

Robin's statement highlights a common feeling among individuals who, despite the difficulties of incarceration, find comfort in the structured environment that prison provides. The routines, combined with the predictability of daily life behind bars, can bring a sense of calm that contrasts sharply with the unpredictability of a criminal lifestyle (Bucerius et. al., 2021). Being incarcerated means spending long periods of time within four concrete walls, often in cells as small as 7 square metres, with little to do. The isolation and monotony, especially before trials, can be mentally and emotionally demanding. However, once inmates

are placed in a prison facility, they often gain access to resources and activities that were previously unavailable when they were incarcerated with restrictions. These might include social interactions with other individuals, access to gym, and opportunities for personal development. For many, this new structure allows them to break free from the constant cycle of stress and survival that characterised their lives outside of prison.

The regularity of prison life, even though it is restrictive, can also work as a stabilising force (Bucerius et. al., 2021). It provides a framework within which individuals can begin to revalue their previous actions, consider their current circumstances, and seriously think about their future. The relative peace and time afforded by the prison environment can lead to significant self-reflection (Maruna, 2011).

The prison environment, with its structured routine and relative safety, can thus serve as a catalyst for personal transformation. While incarceration is undoubtedly a challenging experience, it can also provide the conditions necessary for individuals to undergo profound self-examination and begin the journey toward a reformed identity. This transformation is not guaranteed, but it can be the first step toward building a new, law-abiding life (Maruna, 2011). In this way, the prison system, often seen purely as a punitive measure, can also offer a unique opportunity for rehabilitation. By creating an environment where inmates can find peace, establish routines, and engage in self-reflection, prisons can play a crucial role in helping individuals to reshape their identities and prepare for a future outside the criminal justice system (Ebaugh, 1988).

“It was better before, haha, is it okay to say that? No but seriously, previous the prisons were much better. I did my first sentence 15 years ago, and everything has changed ever since. Now you don’t even have your own room, and you spend more time locked in. It is tougher, and it is noticeable among the people there. More aggression and more conflicts. What do they think will happen when you double the amount of violent people in one place? Of course it will bring chaos.” - Emil

Emil’s comments bring attention to the significant issue of overpopulation in prisons. Bucerius et al. (2021) highlight that overcrowding can lead to deteriorating conditions and increased tensions among inmates, just as Emil says. Overpopulation often results in reduced access to resources, reduced privacy, and heightened stress, which can increase the conflicts

and aggression among prisoners. As Emil points out, the doubling of individuals with a violence capital in a small space can lead to a more chaotic and dangerous environment.

The overpopulation of prisons is not just a matter of physical space but also affects the quality of life and safety within the institution. With increased numbers of inmates, the strains on prison resources intensifies, leading to a decline in the quality of services and facilities. This situation can lead to bigger levels of frustration and aggression among inmates, as they compete for limited resources and face constant overcrowding (Bucerus et al., 2021). Emil's view that conditions have been tougher over time aligns with broader observations about the evolution of prison systems. Historically in a Swedish context, prisons have had more gentle conditions or better facilities, but recent trends towards harsher environments and stricter confinement policies reflect a shift towards more punitive approaches. This change is often driven by policies aimed at increasing security and managing higher inmate populations, but it can also have unintended consequences (Bucerus et al, 2021). The increase in imprisonments and reduced privacy as Emil describes can have significant psychological effects on inmates. Prolonged isolation and lack of personal space can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The lack of privacy and constant exposure to a lot of people can remove the inmate's sense of security and contribute to increased aggression and conflict (Maruna, 2011). Overpopulation can also hinder the ability of correctional institutions to provide good rehabilitative and support services, thereby impacting inmates' chances for successful reintegration into society and leaving their criminal lifestyle. The chaotic environment resulting from overcrowding may also hinder the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs and make it even harder for inmates to transform their lives after their finished their prison sentence (Maruna, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988)

## 5.2 The role of family

One of the most recurring subjects during my interviews was the role of family, especially the importance of mothers and children. Even though I asked questions about other themes and areas, all of the participants kept coming back to the importance of family. This is the focus of what follows.

### 5.2.1 Mothers and children

In all of the interviews, the mothers have a special place for the individuals involved in a criminal lifestyle, and the fact that their mothers are ageing seems to have a triggering effect for leaving a criminal lifestyle behind and instead live a law-abiding life.

”You want to succeed in regular society; as your mother gets older, it becomes a factor. The more people you care about in society, the more you want to stay on the straight and narrow.” - Gustav

Interestingly, the ageing of their mothers emerged as a significant catalyst for individuals to break away from criminality and embrace a law-abiding existence (Ebaugh, 1988). They were the ones who always believed in and stood by the individuals when they were involved in a criminal lifestyle. They helped them with housing when needed, lending money, and are one of the few who doesn't turn their back to the individual, even though they didn't agree with the individual's involvement in a criminal lifestyle. As the mothers get older, and in return need more help, it seems like the individuals want to turn their life around to help their mothers. Having the emotional support from especially mothers can serve as a source of strength and stability (Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993). There is also a shift in the responsibility, a mother has a natural responsibility for her son as he is a teenager and young adult. As he grows up and the mothers get older the sons are more obligated to make her proud and help her, not hurt her.

This constant reminder and consideration the individuals have for their mothers goes in a direct contrast when talking about their fathers. However, in all of the interviews the narratives about the mothers are in some way the same person described. The mothers are the ones who took care of them growing up, even though she might struggle with some aspects, the narrative is clear – she was there. When the interviewees went into a criminal lifestyle, they still had contact with their mothers, met for dinner, celebrated holidays together and they relied on her. They all made clear that their mother didn't like their lifestyle, but she still chose to be a part of their life. And when they leave the criminal lifestyle behind, she continued to support them, both emotional but often also with other aspects. Maruna (2011) points to how narrative transformation is central to this process, as individuals reconstruct their personal stories to align with their efforts to reform and rebuild their lives.

The fathers on the other hand, the stories are shifting. Some of my interviewees grew up in a household without a father and only had stepfathers, others grew up with fathers who abused them or had addiction, and some grew up in a nuclear family with a present father. As the individuals got involved in a criminal lifestyle the fathers abstained from them, or they had already beforehand lost contact. It seems like the relationships with their fathers are more fleeting and do not have the same steady ground as their relationships with their mothers.

One way to understand this is through Maruna's (2011) concept of narrative transformation, where the individuals reinterpret past experiences and relationships to align with their current efforts to leave behind a criminal lifestyle in order to make sense of their previous criminal lifestyle and childhood. This process involves not only reframing their upbringing and past actions but also reshaping their sense of self and identity in a way that supports their journey towards desistance (Maruna, 2011). To have continuous support from their mothers could also be rooted in deeper emotional feelings, as they say themselves - the mothers were always there when they grew up. She was the one who took care of them and by doing so she created a bond between them which is unbreakable even though the individual got involved in a criminal lifestyle. As the mothers get older the individuals seem to understand that their mothers' support isn't forever and that they also are getting older, something which triggers them to leave the criminal lifestyle and in some way take their responsibility and care for their mothers. Moreover, the responsibility extends further for those who have children.

“I mostly left [the criminal lifestyle] for the kids, because I wasn't doing well. I had it good, with parties, women, fancy cars, and money. But when it becomes routine, it's just routine. There was a lot of stress, and I wasn't happy. It was also a lot of stress, especially when you have kids. It might have been easier if I was completely alone.” - Robin

As the children grow up and become teenagers it seems like there is a shift in parenthood. When the children are younger, they spend their time with their mother, she takes care of them, they go to the park, eat sand, and play. As the children grow up and enter adolescence, they also get more freedom. They become more relatable for the fathers and now they aren't sand-eating children anymore, but 15-years old and want to experiment with alcohol or drugs. The fathers know that lifestyle and can now take the responsibility and be a role-model, but

first they need to take a distance from the criminal lifestyle that they themselves are involved in. It could be that their own childhood and relationships with their fathers affect their decisions, and as the children grow up, they want to be a part of their life.

As Ebaugh (1988) points out that the first stage is to question their current role and reflect about what is missing. Robin's quote supports this by saying that he had everything he thought would be necessary to have a fun or good life, with women, money and fancy cars, but he still missed something. A more mundane life without the stress and more focused on the relationship with his children. This balance between a more mundane life and the adrenaline filled life that comes with a criminal lifestyle could also be the reason for why someone relapses in a criminal lifestyle, and how this is a part of the desistance process (Maruna, 2011).

"I: Besides the financial gain from committing criminal acts, was there anything else that made you relapse?

E: Well, normal life wasn't nearly as fun as the criminal life. It was very monotonous, and nothing happened. You did the same things over and over again. You start to romanticise the [criminal] life in your mind, thinking it is a bit exciting to deal a little drugs on the side. But it led me to relapse [into drug use] and almost ruin everything. The criminal life took over, and there was no middle ground. The criminal life dominated." – Emil

Emil's quote is another example of how a 'normal' life eventually becomes boring and mundane, and even after a desistance from the criminal lifestyle the thoughts of that life become glamorous and exciting. Emil tried to balance the normal life with the more adventurous aspects from the criminal life, starting by selling a small amount of drugs. A decision which took over and he eventually lost the normal life in favour of the criminal lifestyle. Maruna (2011) points out that the process of desistance is not a straight line, and that in many cases the individual who seeks desistance will fall back and 'flirt' with criminal aspects to try out and see if it is possible to combine. What Johan describes could also be an example of a 'vacuum-stage', the state after exiting when the individual can experience feelings of numbness and self-doubt, something which could trigger the individual to fall back into their previous identity due to the discomfort and unfamiliarity of their new situation. (Ebaugh, 1988). This vacuum stage is deeply connected to the concept of turning points, those key moments that can either solidify someone's commitment to change or push them back

toward their old ways (Maruna, 2011). For many, leaving prison or deciding to leave a life in criminality marks the start of this transformation. Family support becomes crucial at this point and strong family ties can help someone through the uncertainty and self-doubt, offering the kind of emotional and practical support that is needed to keep them from relapsing (Ebaugh, 1988; Cid and Marty, 2012). Family members can reinforce the decision to change, help the individual find a new ground in the new identity, and provide the stability that makes building a new life possible. On the other hand, if the family relationships are weak or even harmful, this vacuum stage can feel even more overwhelming, making it easier for someone to return to their old lifestyle (Ebaugh, 1988).

### 5.2.2 Prison and family

Prison sentences can be experienced as ambivalent for the individual. On one hand, nobody wants to be imprisoned with all that follows, but on the other hand it seems like prison is a way to stabilise their current existence and to resume contact with their families again.

"You mainly feel for your mom, that you've disappointed her and all... You want her to be proud of you, but instead, she has to go and tell the family that you are back inside." – Johan

Johan's quote is something that often returns in the interviews. From one aspect the punishment is shameful for the individuals themselves, but also upon the individual's family. The individual may feel guilt toward their family, that they are a disappointment and that the family members have to be ashamed in front of others. But it is not just the shame who is apparent, the time in prison could also be a pause, an interruption in an otherwise extreme everyday life where the threat of life and death constantly is present (Bucerius, 2020). Being imprisoned can also be a way to have contact with their families again, a contact who would be lost because of the criminal activities or drug addictions. Fathers who were not allowed to meet their children during the time they took drugs do now have the opportunity to call them or get visits from them. It creates a new start where the environment is safe and there is a lot of time to think about what matters the most - usually relationships and family.

“ I know that my mom told me during a shorter stint I did, that it was a shame and all that I was inside, but still, she felt less worried knowing where I was” - Gustav

Gustav's quote points to another important aspect of being in prison. An individual's relatives no longer have to constantly worry that their son or brother might not survive the evening, and they are relieved from the anxiety about where the individual is, with whom or if the police will knock on their door this night. When they are in prison, at least they know where they are, and that they are safe. It is even possible to call or visit the individual in the prison. This relief can be comforting not only for the family, but for the one in prison as well. For many the time spent in prison was a needful break from the outer stress, but it was also a place where they could connect with their families again. Ebaugh (1988) says that the first step of becoming an ex is to question the current role. With all the time that one has in prison it could be the first moment in a long time that someone has the opportunity to rethink their way of living and if it is worth the costs (Ebaugh, 1988).

Many of those I interviewed also pointed to how it was first when they got sentenced to prison, they were able to reconnect with their families again, even for those who had a partner and children much of their time on the outside were occupied with their friends or involvement in the criminal surroundings. When they were imprisoned, the contact with their friends stopped and they managed to reconnect with their families again. The reason for that is mainly because of two things. First, if they got incarcerated with restrictions the only way to communicate with the outside world was through letters which the attorney first read through before handing the letters over to the individual, which takes time. If a friend sends a letter to the one being incarcerated, the attorney then will also know the connections between them, a risk not many are willing to take. The exception is when the incarcerated has gang-connections, in those cases their friends send in letters and tries to communicate through code-language, however, often the attorneys know this beforehand and stop the incarcerated to receive the letters. Second, not many are aware about the location that their friend is incarcerated, something which means that they need to contact the incarcerated's lawyer to find their friend, not something that many are willing to do.

If the individual goes straight to prison their friends sometimes write in the beginning of the punishment, but as time goes by, they are more and more excluded since they do not participate with the outside world and therefore the letters cease to come.

This is in contrast with the communication with their families, as mentioned before, imprisonment is a way to reconnect and create stronger bonds between the individual in prison and the family on the outside.

### 5.2.3 Family and reintegration

The process of reintegration into society after imprisonment or desistance from a criminal lifestyle is complex and multifaceted, often marked by numerous challenges and obstacles (Ebaugh, 1988; Maruna, 2011; Copp et. al., 2020). Among the various factors that influence successful reintegration, the role of family stands out as one of the most significant. Families often serve as the primary source of emotional, practical, and financial support, helping the individuals to navigate the difficult transition from a crime lifestyle to a law-abiding one.

While the reintegration process involves many external factors, such as employment opportunities and societal acceptance (more of that in the next chapter) it is the intimate and personal nature of the family relationships that frequently determines the success or failure of an individual's efforts to reintegrate. The support, understanding, and stability provided by family members can serve as a crucial support against the many risks associated with relapse into a criminal lifestyle, while tense or fractured family relationships or loneliness can aggravate these risks.

“There is no one who has helped me like my mom has. I have always been able to crash at her place, and she has always covered my expenses until I got back on my feet, even though I've always paid her back, of course” - Gustav

The stability and order that the mothers provide are a fundament for those who left the criminal lifestyle behind. Even if the participants in the interviews mainly talked about practical and financial support, as in Gustav's quote above, they also found emotional support in their families. One aspect that kept coming back was the loneliness after exiting, and how the emotional support was crucial for not relapsing into their previous lifestyle, something which also is supported by Cid & Marti (2012). One of the participants, Emil, shared his experience after completing his sentence, when he was able to secure his first apartment. This new home allowed him to have his child stay with him every other week, which initially

motivated him to leave his criminal lifestyle behind. However, during the weeks when his child was not with him, he struggled with loneliness. Living far from his family and still grappling with his new identity, he sought out new friendships to fill the void. Unfortunately, these newfound friends were involved in activities that were close to being illegal, complicating his efforts to maintain a law-abiding life. This eventually culminated in a relapse into his previous drug abuse. Realising the mental burden of isolation, he decided to move back with his family, recognising that being surrounded by his family was essential for his reintegration and mental well-being. Ebaugh (1988) discusses how individuals exiting criminal lifestyles often face a "vacuum stage," characterised by a lack of direction and increased vulnerability to old habits, given the story that Emil told to me it is clear that he experienced a 'vacuum-stage' during his time in his first apartment. Maruna (2011) further explores the concept of narrative transformation, where family support helps individuals to reconstruct their personal stories and identities in alignment with their efforts to reform. Emil's decision to move back with his family highlights the crucial role of familial support in providing the stability necessary to navigate this vacuum stage. The reintegration process is not only about rebuilding one's life but also about redefining relationships and personal identity (Katz, 1988). The struggle with loneliness and the search for supportive social networks underscores the importance of maintaining strong family ties.

### 5.3 The role of economics

The attraction of a criminal lifestyle often hinges on the perception of easy and immediate financial gain. This perception is powerful, drawing many into a life of crime with the promise of quick and easy money. The dream of financial prosperity is not just a fleeting thought but a vivid and consistent aspiration for many individuals who engage in criminal activities. This dream persists despite the inherent risks and the eventual consequences that come with such a lifestyle. The instant gratification associated with receiving cash directly after illicit transactions, such as drug deals, contrasts sharply with the structured and often delayed rewards of legal employment. In a conventional job, the salary typically comes once a month, creating a sense of predictability and stability but lacking the immediate thrill that comes with illicit earnings. For many involved in crime, the immediate cash flow can create a false sense of financial security and independence. This instant access to money can lead to a lifestyle where spending is unrestrained and immediate needs and desires are met without the constraints of budgeting or planning. However, the reality of this perceived wealth is often

fleeting, and the long-term consequences can be devastating. When an individual decides to leave this lifestyle behind, they often find themselves facing significant financial challenges, compounded by a lack of legitimate financial resources and skills necessary for managing their finances in a lawful manner.

### 5.3.1 Debts and reintegration

“R: It has been a struggle for me to get back on track after all those years, but I can imagine those who don’t have a solid foundation, and there’s no one to help them.

I: Would you like to elaborate?

R: Anything, like getting rid of debt, getting an apartment. It’s hard to live on the streets for five years until everything is gone and survive on nothing. It’s tricky. Many come out with just a plastic bag and 200 kronor, and it’s not easy to get back on their feet, especially if they’re deeply involved and have started using drugs and so on...” - Robin

After finishing a prison sentence many find themselves with a paper bag of clothes and a train ticket home. The banking account has in many times been closed due to unpaid fees, if the individual had an apartment before their sentence, they find themselves evicted due to unpaid rent. Combine this with punishment debts and Robin’s statement about “it is not easy to bounce back” becomes a reality (Gålnander, 2022). Today, it is common for employers to want a copy of one's criminal record when applying for a job, which is another aspect that shuts people out from the labour market, since it takes approximately five years (depending on the crime committed) until the criminal record is clear.

To find a steady job is not the only important aspect that individuals who seek a way out of a criminal lifestyle need, they also need a steady place to live after their sentence (Aaltonen, 2016). To find an apartment without a steady income is difficult. The society can offer some alternatives, transitional housing, where the individual shares space with many others with the same experiences as themselves. A solution which has both good and bad aspects. It is beneficial because the individual lives with others who have an understanding about what the individual has been through, and can offer mutual support and empathy, creating a sense of

community. However, it is also negative due to the risk of relapse in criminality or substance, as the individuals one lives with are experiencing the same adversities and are also aware that there is an escape route back to their previous criminal lifestyle.

Another alternative to housing that society can offer is an apartment through social services. These apartments are however highly attractive and limited, which makes them rare to obtain. Consequently, the incentives to live lawfully and leave the criminal lifestyle behind becomes diminished, since the basic needs such as housing and sustenance are difficult to meet.

“You always think it’s going to be so easy afterwards. As soon as you get out, you expect to live that idyllic life with your girlfriend and kids, but you forget all the costs and have no real sense of what things cost because you’ve been living in a fantasy world. It’s a harsh reality check when you come out and suddenly need to find money from nowhere.” - Gustav

In some cases, the individual has a home to return to after finishing a prison sentence, a wife or girlfriend and children who have waited for the individual to be released. To adapt to everyday life with a family after a prison sentence and be confronted with the realities of finances is something that many individuals are not prepared for. As Gustav’s quote points to, the previous lifestyle in criminality often resulted in a financial security, even though it was unstable in other aspects. To find a new role where they have to live frugally, and especially when they previously could provide for their family and contribute economically, many find themselves reconsidering their choice of leaving the criminal lifestyle. Ebaugh (1988) addresses this fact by describing the ‘hangover-identity’ where the individual needs to find themselves in their new role, still struggling with residuals from their previous identity. The difficulty of this adjustment is even more difficult since the individual has a constant reminder of how easy they used to make money when they still were engaged in criminal activities. The ability to provide for their family, once taken for granted in their former lifestyle, now becomes a source of stress and pressure. This struggle underscored the complexity of the role exit and the enduring impact of one's former identity on their present circumstances (Ebaugh, 1988).

Another important aspect of the role of finances is that even if the individual finds employment, the salary comes once a month. This stability of economics can be a new,

unfamiliar change which the individual is not used to, and which also comes with responsibilities. After the salary comes into their bank account, they first need to pay all their bills, then set aside money so that they can buy clothes, groceries and so on until next month when they get paid again. Having to set a budget and keeping that budget is a type of responsibility which could be boring for anyone. During that month they also need to go up every morning and go to work. The lack of excitement, combined with no instant reward for keep showing up to work every day could be frustrating and dull at the same time, since the reward for one's work is delayed.

“In the criminal world, you know you can always get money when you need it, you can just purchase on deferred terms or borrow from someone until things turn around. All of that becomes impossible when you try to be honest, then all you can do is just keep on working.” - Liam

The exciting but disordered stands in a total contrast against the boring and ordered. In his statement, Liam is also addressing that one way of solving one's financial status in a criminal lifestyle is to simply borrow from someone. This brings in an important of the criminal lifestyle – the reliance on social bonds and networks, which functions as a form of ‘social glue’ that keeps the individuals connected in the criminal lifestyle. As Katz (1988) argues that criminal acts are not just a rational choice driven by economic need or social pressure but is also deeply rooted in the emotional and existential experiences that individuals encounter and emphasises that the thrill, excitement, and sense of empowerment that come from a criminal lifestyle are often intertwined with the social relationships that develop within certain networks or groups. These experiences create a powerful social glue, as the emotional highs associated within a criminal lifestyle are often shared and reinforced by close-knit groups of peers. For many individuals, the sense of friendship, loyalty, and mutual support within these groups becomes a significant source of identity and belonging. Katz (1988) describes how the shared thrill of the acts in a criminal lifestyle, such as the adrenaline rush of a heist or the satisfaction of outsmarting authorities, creates a deep connection for the participants. This bond goes beyond just cooperation, it becomes a central aspect of their social life and personal identity (Maruna, 2011). The emotional rewards that Katz (1988) describes make the criminal lifestyle not just a means to an end but an end in itself for many individuals. The

excitement of a criminal lifestyle and the strong social connections within these groups create a compelling environment that is difficult to leave. The shared experiences and the sense of being part of something "special" or "elite" further reinforces these bonds, making the one who wants to leave their criminal lifestyle feel like they lost a part of their identity as well as their community. The meaningfulness of social bonds in a criminal lifestyle is a key factor that sustains individuals within that lifestyle. The social glue, formed through shared experiences, mutual dependencies, and the promise of support, becomes an integral part of their identity and way of life. For someone like Liam, who wants to leave the criminal lifestyle is not just about changing behaviour, it also involves breaking away from a crucial source of social and emotional support which can make the change particularly difficult (Ebaugh, 1988; Maruna, 2011).

## 5.4 Identity

Leaving a criminal lifestyle behind is not just about stop doing criminal activities. For many it means having to give up on their whole identity and transform into something new. During the interviews I discussed this phenomenon a lot and had ambiguous answers. One of the individuals I interviewed kept talking about how his ego was the constant hinder for him, and how it had always been his ego who drew him deeper into the criminal lifestyle. This narrative is addressed by Maruna (2011) who says that the ego plays a crucial role in self-narratives. According to Maruna (2011), individuals who successfully desist from crime often reconstruct their personal identities by viewing themselves in a more positive light. This involves a reformation of the "ego" where the individual no longer sees themselves as inherently criminal or deviant, but rather as someone capable of change and worthy of a new, law-abiding identity. This shift in ego is important because it allows the individual to distance themselves from their past lifestyle and embrace a future that aligns with living a law-abiding lifestyle. Maruna (2011) argues that this transformation of self-identity is not just about seeing oneself differently but about integrating this new self-concept into everyday life. The ego becomes a driving force in maintaining this new identity and resisting to relapse into a criminal lifestyle again.

“If it hadn’t been for going through that [self-help program], it would never have worked. Damn, I learned so much about myself there and why I always did what I did and ended up in the same place all the time.” - Alex

One of the recurring points many of the participants also got back to where self-help programs and therapy (either voluntarily or as a part of prison programs). The feelings towards these programs were both praised and with a fair amount of critique. Depending on the individual's receptivity, and place in life in general, therapy and self-help programs can work as a successful force to reform their previous thoughts about themselves and what they are capable of. When I discussed therapy and self-help programs the interviewees said that it was most helpful when they, after finishing a prison sentence, searched for help to develop new skills and qualities that were necessary for reintegration. Unfortunately, it was also common to search for help or therapy after a prison sentence, mainly due to mental health problems but also as a way to get help when reintegration in society but be denied that help.

When discussing identity, it is also important to be aware of how the individual protects and maintains their identity. All of my interviewees, no matter if they still were involved in criminal activities or left that lifestyle years ago, they talked about their criminal lifestyle with a duality. First off, they referred to their previous lifestyle as a time and place where they were lost, or very insecure. Where appearance such as fancy cars or the ability to flash with money and violence capital were highly admirable and how they now, can see how I was all 'fake' and shallow and that the lack of real emotional relationships made them eventually leave their criminal life. However, despite this fact where they distance themselves from who they were before, it was at the same time something that was highly glamorised during our discussions. Because even though they referred to their previous lifestyle as shallow, they still highlighted how fast the cars were, how much money they spent in one night, and other thrilling aspects that, despite their downsides, held a certain allure. This glamorisation reveals a complex relationship with their past identity. While they acknowledge the superficiality and emotional emptiness of their former lives, they also can't completely detach from the excitement and status that came with it. From that it is not hard to understand why my interviewees said that they liked their time in prison. Because in prison they are surrounded with others who think just like them, and they all share the experience of 'being caught', a value that otherwise is highly admirable in a criminal lifestyle – that they outsmarted the police and the legal system. But in prison they are all there on common grounds and have few options to portray themselves as 'badass', since they all are lacking financial opportunities to show off on the inside (Katz, 1988). However, they can still compete with each other by telling stories about how tough they were as a criminal and creating a narrative about themselves. This shared environment in prison allows them to maintain their 'badass' identity without actually needing

to engage in risky or illegal behaviour. In a way, prison becomes a safe space where they can uphold their tough persona, free from the real dangers of the streets or the criminal world. They don't have to constantly prove themselves through actions like committing crimes or living on the edge, instead, they can share stories and recount their past exploits. This setting provides a form of validation and acceptance among others who understand their experiences, making the prison experience more appealing. It's a place where they can still feel like they're living up to their old identity, but within the safety of a controlled environment.

“I completely lost myself. I knew the kind of crap I didn't want to return to, but damn, it's all about making a final decision and fighting your way back.” - Gustav

Gustav's quote captures the internal conflict many individuals face when leaving a criminal lifestyle. He acknowledges a great loss of self and recognizes the challenges of reinventing oneself. This feeling aligns with Maruna's (2011) concept of identity transformation, which suggests that transforming from a criminal lifestyle requires not only a change in behaviour but also a deep reformation of self-perception. Gustav's saying of having “lost himself” highlights the difficulty of detaching from a deeply ingrained criminal identity, which Maruna argues is central to the process of desisting from crime (Maruna, 2011). The struggle to define a new identity is complicated by the lasting influence of past behaviours and the need to prove a renewed self. Maruna (2011) means that successful desisters often reconstruct their identities by integrating a positive self-narrative that emphasises their capacity for change. For Gustav, the process of “deciding to fight back” suggests an attempt to rebuild his identity in a way that contrasts with his previous criminal self. This internal battle illustrates Maruna's theory that the ego plays a crucial role in maintaining and reforming one's identity. Gustav's struggle to move beyond his past reflects the broader challenge of matching new identities for himself with everyday actions. Katz's (1988) perspectives into emotional capital further deepens this analysis. Katz (1988) argues that criminal behaviour is often driven by the pursuit of emotional rewards and status. For individuals like Gustav, who are transitioning out of a criminal lifestyle, the loss of this emotional capital, such as the thrill and status associated with criminal acts, can create a vacuum that complicates the reintegration process (Ebaugh, 1988). Gustav's sense of having “lost himself” reflects the difficulty in finding new sources of emotional fulfilment and validation outside of the criminal context. The challenge of “fighting back” underscores the emotional and psychological toll of losing the status and excitement

previously gained from the criminal lifestyle. Gustav's experience, therefore, highlights the interplay between Maruna's notion of identity transformation and Katz's theory of emotional capital. It illustrates how the process of leaving behind a criminal lifestyle involves not only a change in external behaviour but also a significant internal struggle to redefine oneself and find new sources of emotional and psychological validation. This dualistic challenge, to both navigating the identity transformation while coping with the loss of emotional capital demonstrates the complexity of the journey from a criminal lifestyle to a law-abiding life.

Another important aspect of creating a new identity and coping with their previous lifestyle is the use of humour. During the interviews, participants frequently shared funny anecdotes, often about themselves and sometimes about others, which is unusual given the "code of the street" that says that one should only speak about oneself, not others. These stories, though often sad or concerning, were told with a smile, seemingly inviting me to laugh along with them. This use of humour felt deliberately provocative, as if it was a way to lighten the gravity of their experiences. For instance, one participant recounted how he, after leaving the criminal lifestyle, tried to be a good father and husband. He went to work, and everything seemed to be going well. However, one night, someone drove by his house and shot at it, leaving multiple holes in the wall. Despite the seriousness of this event, it was told with a certain levity, as if the humour was a necessary tool to cope with the absurdity and sadness of the situation. This aligns with the idea that humour is not just a coping mechanism but also a critical tool in the identity transformation process. Bergson (1911) discusses how both laughter and humour can serve as a form of critique against one's previous identity, allowing individuals to distance themselves from their past and Tutenges (2022) supports this view, noting that "there may be few other options but to laugh when somebody throws a bewilderingly sad story at you.". My participant continued the story and told me how he after the shooting feared for his and his children's life, but not wanting to retaliate he saw no other option than to leave the country for a while. This ability to laugh at one's past may be a useful tool in the ongoing process of reshaping identity and committing to a new, law-abiding life. But, telling this story he also briefly mentioned that the police (naturally) came to his house and wanted to investigate the shooting and that he in no way participated in the investigation or talked to the police, which led to the preliminary investigation being dropped. This instinct of not talking to the police, even though he now lived a law-abiding life and were the victim of a serious threat – that someone shot at his house where he lived with his children, he still remained silent in front of the police. Also showing the duality in the process of leaving and

how the hangover-identity could affect someone who formerly lived a criminal lifestyle for a long period of time (Ebaugh, 1988). It is also noticeable that when he retells the story, he makes a point of mentioning that he did not want to participate in the police investigation. This could be a sign that he is still dealing with the hangover-identity, wanting to portray himself as 'badass,' even though he obviously was so frightened that he ultimately left the country (Ebaugh, 1988; Katz, 1988).

This use of humour as a coping mechanism and as a tool for navigating their identity transformation was not unique.

“There was one time when I was in the car with the kids and the police pulled me over and started searching the vehicle. I had a gun in the trunk, and it went off when the officer was fiddling with it, and he ended up shooting himself in the hand. It caused a huge fuss, as if I was going around shooting police officers with the kids in the back. I couldn’t help it if he was so clumsy.” – Robin

This story, which involved a near-traumatic encounter where a police officer accidentally shot himself with a gun found in Robin's car while his children were in the backseat, was told to me with a smile on his face. He seemed to want me to laugh, yet also to be shocked by the absurdity of the situation. In this story, the duality of his identity is particularly prominent. On one hand, Robin is constructing a narrative about himself as a ‘badass,’ almost bragging about the extreme situations he found himself in during his criminal life (Katz, 1988). On the other hand, by using humour, he is also subtly criticising his former self, acknowledging the danger and recklessness of that situation, especially with his children present (Bergson, 1911). This dual approach to recounting his past highlights the complex interplay between maintaining a tough persona and recognising the gravity of his previous lifestyle. By wrapping these serious events in humour, Robin, like other participants, is able to navigate the tension between his past identity and his efforts to construct a new, law-abiding self.

## 6. Conclusions

This study has mainly focused on the narratives from those who are or have been involved in a criminal lifestyle to better understand firstly, what triggered them to leave, and secondly, how they maintained and sustained the process of leaving. The data was collected through interviews with individuals who still are active in a criminal lifestyle, as well as individuals

who have left their previous lifestyle. Some of the interviewees also had experiences from first leaving a criminal lifestyle, then relapse, and eventually find their way back to a law-abiding life.

The interviews were analysed through theories about exits (Ebaugh, 1988), transformative narratives (Maruna, 2011), and identity and then focused on the most prominent findings from the interviews which were the role of family, the role of economics, the role of prison, and identity.

One of the main triggering aspects of leaving a criminal lifestyle was imprisonment. The interviewees talked about how they were feeling doubts about their current lifestyle and had thoughts about another kind of life when they still were engaged in a criminal lifestyle, but they did not know how to leave or take the first step. A prison sentence offered them the exit without being personally responsible for the leave. Offering them an easy way out. All of their friends knew that they would be away in prison for some time and therefore did not count on them anymore, the motorcycle club leader had someone to fill his position, and others that I interviewed talked about not being involved in the same way as before and not being afraid to either have to kill or being killed in the streets. Since many of their friends also had a crime register, they were not allowed phone or contact permission, leaving them to send letters, which many did not receive from their friends. Being excluded from that lifestyle offered them to establish new relationships with their family and children, relationships who were still intact when they finished their sentence.

For the role of family as a sustaining factor all of the individuals I interviewed kept referring to the importance of family, especially their mothers and their children. Their relationship to other family members such as fathers were more in the background and were often not even mentioned unless I specifically asked for it. Maruna (2011) points out the importance of social support when leaving a criminal lifestyle behind, and in this study the role of mothers was the most recurring topic. The individuals that I interviewed held their mothers very close to their heart and talked very highly about their mothers. Continuously coming back to how they did not want to hurt their mothers or let them down, now when they finally left their criminal lifestyle. The role of family also included children. The interlocutors who had children also talked about the importance of being a good role model and a good father for their children. They all had in common that they, because of life in criminality or imprisonment in various grades, had been absent when their children grew up. They seem to still be balancing the idea or the dream about being a good father with the fact that they in some way let their children

down and needed to make it up. Many showed remorse when they talked about how they missed their children growing up, but also used a lot of humour and were telling ‘funny anecdotes’ about how they tried to combine a criminal lifestyle with being a father (Bergson, 2011). Undoubtedly, all of the interlocutors said that it was because of the children and how they needed them to make them stay with the law-abiding life.

The triggering factors of family are not being able to fulfil the role as a father. Many of the interviewees kept coming back to how they let their children down and had to work hard to maintain and establish a relationship with them. If the children were older, or teenagers, they often struggled with trust. Their children were not used to their fathers with their problems or did not forgive them for being absent. Not being able to be the role model as they wanted to and maintain their “new” relationships could be a triggering factor to go back to their previous network and friends in order to find community and connection again, instead of being alone, even though they acknowledge their old relationships to be the bad. Prison also allowed the individuals to have stability which allowed them to still maintain their ‘badass’-persona but within an ordered structure. Being imprisoned also made them safe and the same, mundane, routines inside the prison walls created a normal structure and order in an otherwise very chaotic lifestyle. The individuals could however still have their self-image intact, being this “dangerous criminal”, which for some was the only capital they had (Katz, 1988). This highlights the importance of transformation and makes it possible for the transformation to take time to transcend from the adrenaline filled, fun life that comes with the criminal lifestyle to a more stable, boring and law-abiding life (Maruna, 2011). Remaining the order and structure from prison after being released also works as a sustaining factor, as long as the individual can adapt to the more dull everyday life.

The threats are if the individual is not capable of creating the stability that is necessary on the outside and instead are missing the adrenaline rushes from the criminal lifestyle, as well as the stability of prison and the identity work it enabled. Dealing with the ‘hangover-identity’ and facing the problem to find their new identities as a law-abiding citizen could be a reason to fall back into a criminal lifestyle (Ebaugh, 1988).

The economic factors such as debts incurred, having trouble to support themselves and not being able to raise money. Finding a steady job with a crime register is hard, and even though they might find a job it is often a low-income job where the salary comes once a month. For someone who is used to a financial rollercoaster it could be utterly boring and patience-demanding to work every day for a month but still have to wait weeks for the salary, when

they instead could do a criminal act and have money the same day. For someone who tries to live a law-abiding life, they do not have the possibility to borrow money from their previous friends, since it would mean that they now owe the friend a favour. The individuals are not only excluded from favours and reciprocations, but also from the social glue from their previous network (Katz, 1988).

Finally, identity and the journey of leaving a criminal lifestyle involves much more than simply just stop doing criminal acts, it requires a profound transformation of the identity (Maruna, 2011). As the interviews reveals, this transformation is complex and filled with internal conflicts where the individuals must confront and reshape deeply ingrained aspects of their ego and self-perception. The narratives shared by the participants highlight the duality of their experiences – while they seek to distance themselves from their past, they also continue to navigate with the thrill and status associated with their former identities. The role of humour appears as a significant tool in this process, serving both as a coping mechanism and as a means to criticise and distance themselves from past behaviours. By using levity, it becomes feasible to openly talk about serious and sometimes traumatic events, it also serves as a way to navigate the tension between maintaining a ‘badass-persona’ and acknowledging the dangers from their previous lives. This dual approach does not only help them manage the psychological challenges of reintegration but also plays a critical role in the ongoing process of identity reconstruction. Overall, the transformation from living a criminal lifestyle to a law-abiding identity is a multifaceted and ongoing process that requires the individuals to combine their past with their aspirations for the future. It involves not just a behavioural change, but also a deeper effort to redefine their own perception about themselves, this is often done with the help of others, such as therapy or self-help programs. This process is often non-linear and the individuals struggles with finding their new place and navigating in their new life, for example with hangover-identity from their past where they need to find a moral compass which fits in with living a law-abiding lifestyle (Ebaugh, 1988). The narratives shared in this thesis underscore the complexity of this journey and the significant psychological and emotional work required to successfully navigate it.

For future research it would be interesting to deeper explore the traumatic or sad stories told in a lighthearted, humorous tone. How do individuals use humour to navigate their experiences of trauma and their experiences of living a criminal lifestyle? Investigating these 'sad stories' can provide valuable insights into the complexities of their narratives, revealing how humour serves not only to diffuse tension but also to help individuals process their

previous life. By analysing this interplay between humour and trauma, it becomes possible to uncover the nuanced ways in which individuals construct their identities and navigate the journey toward desistance.

## 7. References:

- Aaltonen, M., Oksanen, A., & Kivivuori, J. (2016). Debt problems and crime. *Criminology*, 54(2), 307–331.
- Bayer, P., Hjalmarsson, R., & Pozen, D. (2009). Building criminal capital behind bars: Peer effects in juvenile corrections. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124(1), 105–147.
- Bergson, H. (1911). *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic*. Macmillan.
- Brookman, F., Copes, H., & Hochstetler, A. (2011). Street codes as formula stories: How inmates recount violence. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 40(4), 397–424.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Cid, J., & Martí, J. (2012). Turning points and returning points: Understanding the role of family ties in the process of desistance. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 12(1), 41–59.
- Copp, J. E., Giordano, P. C., Longmore, M. A., & Manning, W. D. (2020). Desistance from crime during the transition to adulthood: The influence of parents, peers, and shifts in identity. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 57(3), 294–332.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427819878220>
- Davis, L. M., Bozick, R., Steele, J. L., Saunders, J., & Miles, J. N. V. (2013). *Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education: A meta-analysis of programs that provide education to incarcerated adults*. RAND Corporation.
- Djankov, S., Hart, O., McLiesh, C., & Shleifer, A. (2008). Debt enforcement around the world. *Journal of Political Economy*, 116(6), 1105–1149.
- Ebaugh, H. R. F. (1988). *Becoming an ex: The process of role exit*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ferrell, J., Hayward, K., & Young, J. (2008). *Cultural criminology: An invitation*. SAGE Publications.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Anchor Books.

- Gålnander, R. (2022). The anxiety of a lifetime: Dealing with debt in desistance from crime. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 23(2), 191–208.
- Harper, A., Ginapp, C., Bardelli, T., et al. (2021). Debt, incarceration, and re-entry: A scoping review. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46(2), 250–278.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09559-9>
- Harding, S. (2014). *Street casino: Survival in violent street gangs* (1st ed.). Bristol University Press.
- Haney, C. (2003). *The psychological impact of incarceration: Implications for post-prison adjustment*. Urban Institute.
- Healy, D. (2010). *The dynamics of desistance: Charting pathways through change*. Willan Publishing.
- Hornqvist, M. (2012). Penal exceptionalism? Nordic prison policy and practice. *Theoretical Criminology*, 16(2), 257–259.
- Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime: Moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*. Basic Books.
- Luker, K. (2020). *Salsa dancing into the social: How a dance form and its cultural meanings shape social interactions*. Routledge.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. American Psychological Association.
- Martire, K., Sunjic, S., Topp, L., & Indig, D. (2011). Financial sanctions and the justice system: Fine debts among New South Wales prisoners with a history of problematic substance use. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 44(2), 258–271.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0004865811405258>
- Redondo, S., Padrón-Goya, F., & Martín, A. M. (2022). Offenders' narratives on criminal desistance while serving a prison sentence. *Victims & Offenders*, 17(3), 439–467.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2021.1910601>
- Renton, D. (2018). *Social research: Theory, methods and practice*. Sage Publications.

Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1997). A life-course theory of cumulative disadvantage and the stability of delinquency. In T. P. Thornberry (Ed.), *Developmental theories of crime and delinquency* (Vol. 7, pp. 133–161). Transaction Publishers.

Savolainen, J. (2009). Work, family and criminal desistance: Adult social bonds in a Nordic welfare state. *British Journal of Criminology*, 49(3), 285–304.

Tutenges, S. (2022). *Intoxication: An ethnography of effervescent revelry*. Rutgers University Press.

Uggen, C., Manza, J., & Behrens, A. (2004). Less than the average citizen: Stigma, role transition, and the civic reintegration of convicted felons. In S. Maruna & R. Immarigeon (Eds.), *After crime and punishment: Pathways to offender reintegration* (pp. 258–290). Willan Publishing.

Walker, K., Bowen, E., & Brown, S. (2013). Psychological and criminological factors associated with desistance from violence: A review of the literature. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 41(3), 153–162.

Western, B. (2006). *Punishment and inequality in America*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Westerlund, A. (2021). *Gang entry and exit: A study of previous gang members in Sweden*. Routledge.

## Web Sources

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Bias-free language: Disability*. Retrieved from <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/disability>

Polisen. (2024, February). *Totalt 62 000 bedöms aktiva eller ha koppling till kriminella nätverk*. Retrieved from <https://polisen.se/aktuellt/nyheter/nationell/2024/februari/totalt-62-000-bedoms-aktiva-eller-ha-koppling-till-kriminella-natverk/>

Brottsförebyggande rådet. (n.d.). *Återfall i brott*. Retrieved from <https://bra.se/statistik/kriminalstatistik/aterfall-i-brott.html>