

# RESPONSE

## On Desistance and Resistance

Justin Piché

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It has long been established that the retributive approach to criminalized acts often fails to meet the needs of those impacted (Zehr, 1990) and that imprisonment, in particular, causes great harm to human beings who endure it (Sykes, 1958). There is also considerable evidence that the collateral consequences of criminalization experienced by criminalized people (e.g. barriers in obtaining basic necessities like housing and employment), their loved ones (e.g. material and psychological impacts of forced separation from imprisoned family members), and communities (e.g. diversion of community resources towards policing and prisons) extend well beyond the punishments prescribed by the courts (see, for example, Kirk and Wakefield, 2018). It is no wonder that so many caught up in the punitive injustice system are unable to escape its clutches.

The above is certainly evident in this special issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) on desistance, social justice, and lived experience. The articles contained therein may prompt the reader, like it prompted me, to ask – as desistance scholars and the editors of this collection do – “*how*” do “people manage to forge and sustain a path away from criminal[ized] engagement” (Maier et al., 2022, p. 2 – my emphasis)? Indeed, how does one desist after having been dehumanized and degraded through practices such as solitary confinement, with little to no access to meaningful work behind bars, while living an existence where the threat of violence from staff and other imprisoned people is real as vividly described by Stephon Whitley (2022)? How does one desist after repeated assaults on their psyche, and exposure to a prison environment that promotes and rewards toxic behaviour as recounted by Daniel Micklethwaite (2022), while failing to recognize efforts to change as documented by Ruth Utnage (2022)? How does one desist when their efforts to ‘do good’ are met with consistent doubt, scrutiny, and barriers of the kind encountered by James Binnall (2022)?

When criminalized and imprisoned people endure so much structural violence and organized abandonment yet make changes in their lives within the narrowed field of possibilities available to them and desist from harmful behaviour, as the contributors to this special issue of the *JPP* have, it is indeed remarkable. As the pieces by Christopher Havens and Marta Cerruti (2022)

on the power of access to education, Kris MacPherson on the importance of family, Christopher Kay, along with Carolynne Mason and Tom Hartley (2022) on the transformative potential of sport, also make clear, having links to the outside world during and following one's imprisonment is also critical in fostering de-carceral futures for people.

As I read this collection, I also saw parallels between the commitment of contributors to desist from harmful behaviour and abolitionist visions of accountability, which encourage perpetrators to make amends to those they have harmed and make changes in their lives with community support, yet there is a need to also push further through collective transformative justice organizing that aims to abolish structures of power that give rise to social conflict and harm (Kaba, 2020). Considering Francis Kroncke's (2022) stunning account of the pernicious and mundane violence of imprisonment he endured as a Vietnam war resister and prisoner of conscious, it is also incumbent that calls for desistance of behaviours *when* they impinge upon the safety of people include demands for the state to desist from harm, including the damage done through criminalization and punishment (Piché, forthcoming) as well. Such calls need to be bolstered by collective resistance. In the context racial capitalism and the pervasive insecurity it engenders, it is clear that we need to "change everything" (Gilmore, 2022) if we are to achieve broader desistance from harm and social justice in our time.

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