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Dimensions of desistance : a qualitative longitudinal analysis of different dimensions of the desistance process among long-term prisoners in the Netherlands

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CHAPTER 3

THE MEN

This chapter provides an overview of some of the characteristics of the 28 interviewed men and the larger (Dutch) context surrounding them to give a more complete image of the (social) context of these men. Topics are divided into six paragraphs. The first paragraph starts with an overview of the description of participants that they provided themselves since each interview started with the same question: 'Describe yourself in three words'. Then, some demographical information of the sample is presented in the second paragraph, followed by the legal framework of the crimes the men were convicted for, such as sentence and imprisonment length, and imposed conditions tied to their conditional release. Topics concerning their time spent in prison such as courses, visits and leaves will be explored in the fourth paragraph, continuing with the men's social situation before and after imprisonment when it comes to partner, children, housing, employment and drugs. Finally, criminal history and recidivism is presented. If the topic entails information about the follow-up interviews after release, only data from the men who participated in either two or all three interviews were included

3.1. DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS BY THEMSELVES

The start of the interviews was always the same, breaking the ice and setting the participant at ease. The men were asked to describe themselves (their present selves, i.e. what described them best at the time of the interview) using three words. The responses to this question for each interview round are visually displayed in a word cloud timeline (see Figure 3.1). Interestingly, the first two words to describe themselves always referred to good characteristics, such as social and helpful, whereas the third word usually seemed to reflect another side, such as 'innovative', 'selfish', 'determined', which they often framed in the context of their criminal activities. Overall, answers seem to stay more or less the same over-time: social, cheerful and calm. However, the answers to this question at the first follow-up interview three months after release seemed to contain more words reflecting the first 'messy' months after release, such as 'restless', 'tired' and 'stressed'.

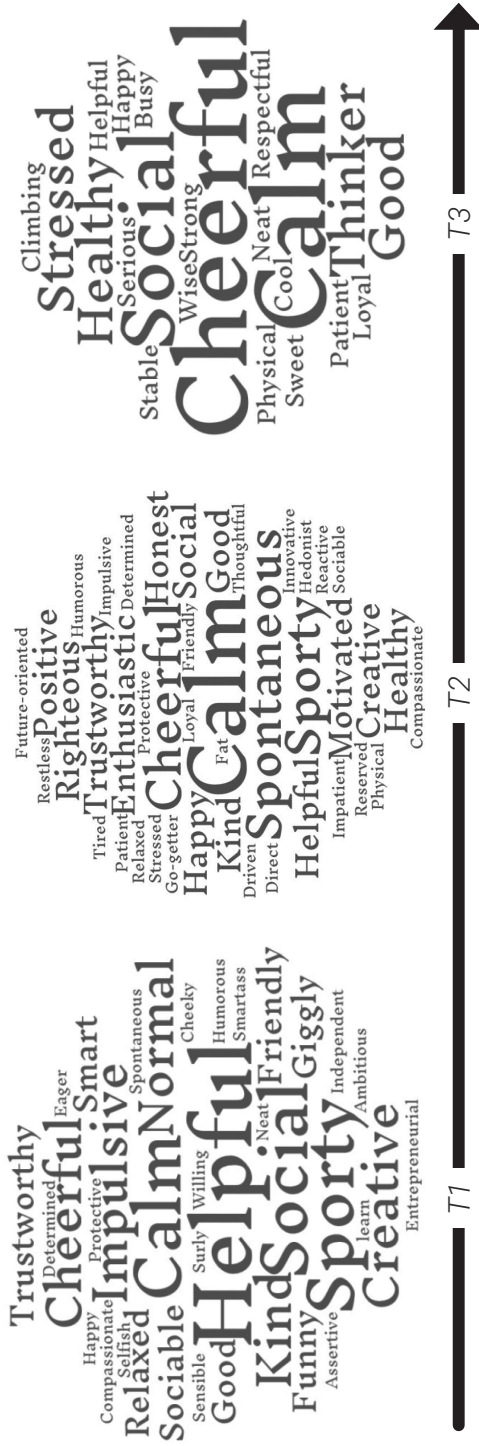


Figure 3.1 Word cloud showing responses to the question: "Describe yourself in three words" from all interview rounds (T1, T2, T3).

3.2 DEMOGRAPHICS

The mean age of the 28 men (at the time of the in-prison interview) was 27 years with a range of 21–53 years old. Three quarters of the sample (21 out of 28) was younger than 29 years at the time of the pre-release interview. The other half consisted mostly of men aged between 25 and 34 years. In 2012, 2013 and 2016, prisoners between 20 and 29 years made up the largest share of the Dutch prison population varying from 35 to almost 40 percent of the total prison population (De Looff et al., 2017, Table 3.7). The current sample has a higher percentage of men younger than 30 years, but this may reflect the length of the sentence and thus the offence they were convicted for. Offenders who are younger than 30 years are overrepresented in crimes combining property and violence, which is the case for armed robberies (Beijersbergen et al., 2018; De Looff et al., 2017).

All men were born in the Netherlands, but 19 out of 28 men (67%) were second generation immigrants, meaning that at least one of their parents was born in a foreign country. This mirrors the Dutch prison population in which ethnic minorities are overrepresented. In 2015, 62 percent of all prisoners originated from a migrant background which means that at least one of their parents was born in a foreign country (CBS Statline, 2017).

3.3 LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The sample members were currently convicted for (multiple) mostly violent crimes such as armed robberies, attempted manslaughter and extortion, often in combination with a weapon. The men were serving sentences between two to three (n=8) or four to five years (n=20) and the average time they spend in prison before they were released was 39 months (range 30 to 50 months). On average the men had served time in three different locations during this prison sentence (including the remand centre).

All men had specific conditions tied to their release relating to different legally grounded categories:¹ check-ins, contact restrictions, location bans, residence orders, curfews, treatment orders, behavioural intervention orders and drug bans. In 2011, a national action programme (in Dutch: Programma Gewelddadige Vermogenscriminaliteit PGVC) targeting specific offenders of so-called High Impact Crimes was implemented (Ministry of Security and Justice, 2014, 2016). One of the measures included in this programme, was that soon to be released prisoners convicted for violent crimes were placed into the most intensive level of supervision

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1 Kamerstukken II 2009-2010, 32 319, nr. 3.

after release, meaning weekly check-ins and house visits often together with freedom-limiting measures such as curfews and location bans which can be verified by electronic monitoring. The large majority of the current sample was indeed placed into the most intensive form of supervision with a multitude of requirements, because of a high risk assessment combined with the crime they were in for.

3.4 LIFE DURING IMPRISONMENT

Courses

The four behavioural interventions the men could participate in during their imprisonment were: Cognitive Skills Training (CoVa), Lifestyle Training for Addicted Offenders, Job Skill Training and Aggression Replacement Training (Ministry of Justice, 2005). Recently, it was revealed that only 40 percent of all prisoners who fulfil the requirements for behavioural interventions between October 2010 and March 2011 completed one of the interventions of the Prevention of Recidivism Programme (Bosma, Kunst & Nieuwbeerta, 2013). Furthermore, since the end of 2011, a Choose for Change course, based on the thought of prison as a turning point (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Nelissen & Schreurs, 2008), is offered to prisoners who want to be promoted to the plus-regime and get access to rehabilitative activities. The plus-regime is part of a system of promotion and demotion that has been introduced to the prison system in March 2014, targeting all prisoners who show pro-social behaviour and motivation to disengage from crime (*Staatscourant*, 2014). Before, specific treatment modules and phased re-entry were only available to detainees with a prison sentence of at least four months under the wings of the Prevention of Recidivism Programme (Van der Linden, 2004).

The participants of the current study all started their imprisonment before March 2014 and were almost all released after this date, so they often experienced the implementation of both policies in prison. Out of 28 men, 23 entered (and completed) one of the behavioural interventions mentioned above during imprisonment, mostly the Choose for Change course (n=14) and the Cognitive Skills Training (n=14), often combined. Furthermore, some also passed for a vocational certificate, for example with regard to painting, security or operating a fork lift. Three men did not sign up for any course, they said they did not want to and they thought it was not useful.

Table 3.1. Descriptives of the sample during imprisonment concerning courses, leaves and visits (N=28).

Alias	Behavioural courses					Leaves	Visits
	CST	CC	LTAO	JKT	ART		
Aaron	x					Yes	No
Ab						No	Yes
Casper		x				Yes	No
Charles		x				Yes	Yes
Dave	x					Yes	Yes
Leon		x				Yes	No
Peter						Yes	Yes
Richard						Yes	No
Tom		x				Yes	Yes
Tony	x	x				Yes	No
Bart						No	No
Chris	x		x		x	No	No
Isaac		x				No	Yes
Jack	x	x	x			No	No
Kay		x				No	Yes
Martin	x	x				No	Yes
Milo						No	No
Nathan	x					Yes	Yes
Nick			x			Yes	No
Oscar		x				No	No
Pascal	x		x			Yes	Yes
Roy	x				x	Yes	No
Rudy	x	x	x			Yes	Yes
Sam	x					No	No
Simon	x	x				No	No
Vince	x					No	Yes
Wessel		x				No	Yes
Xavier	x	x				Yes	Yes

Note: CST= Cognitive Skills Training, CC= Choose for Change, LTAO= Lifestyle Training for Addicted Offenders, JKT = Job Skill Training, ART= Aggression Replacement Training

Note: Leaves = during current imprisonment, visits = at the time of the in-prison interview

Leaves

A prison sentence must be dedicated to prepare a prisoner for re-entry to society as much as possible according to section 2 of the Dutch Penitentiary Principles Act. This can also include giving permission for rehabilitative leaves which aims to enable prisoners to *gradually* prepare for re-entry to society. To qualify for leaves and other rehabilitation opportunities, a prisoner needs to be in the plus-regime and show to be working on rehabilitation. There is a variety of reasons why leaves can be denied: when there is a flight risk, risks to use alcohol or drugs, or a recidivism

risk. Also, leaves can be denied when the address where the prisoner would spend the leaves is not deemed acceptable.² For example, when the person living at that address has a criminal record.

Half of the sample in the current study was given one or more leaves during the current imprisonment (15 out of 28). The other half reported that their applications for a leave were rejected, sometimes multiple times and as a result, they had not been on leave yet at the time of the in-prison interview three months before release. For example, the addresses that Wessel registered to spend his leave, could not be approved since individuals with a criminal record were living there. Except for one, all participants who were granted leave, returned from it at the designated time. One prisoner did not return from his first leave and manage to stay outside for a few weeks until he was arrested again. Note that at the follow-up interview three months after release, a few men mentioned that they had been granted one or more leaves after the initial interview held in prison approximately three months before release. However, Table 3.2 displays who were given one or more leaves from the start of their imprisonment until the time of the interview.

Visits

According to article 38 of the Dutch Penitentiary Principles Act, every prisoner has the right to receive at least one visiting hour a week. This number could be increased up to two hours a week if someone has been promoted to the plus-regime (*Staatscourant*, 2014). Each prison can decide on how to implement this right and to set house rules for visits. In practice this means that some prisons make an effort to offer visiting hours in the evenings or weekends instead of solely during working hours, making it easier for children, partner or parents to visit.

Almost all men received visits at some point during their prison spell. This often took place at the start of the imprisonment. At the time of the pre-release interview with the imminent release date, half of the sample said they were not having visitors over anymore, for a while now already (varying from the past few months to the past year). Partly because of their upcoming release date, some also contemplated about how the years passed by and they lost touch in a way. A few men still appreciated to have visitors, but most men expressed mixed emotions about visitation. On the one hand, participants said it is good to see your loved ones and to be able to stay in touch, talk about how things are going at home. On the other hand, visits can be an emotional event with crying mothers, girlfriends or children and also a confrontational event when they leave to their homes and the prisoner to his cell. Most participants agreed that doing time is more difficult when ties to the outside world remain close.

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2 Article 4 'Regeling tijdelijk verlaten van de inrichting' grounded in article 26 of the Dutch Penitentiary Principles Act.

People who came to visit included parents, friends, (ex-)partners and, to a lesser degree children. Men who were still in contact with their children confessed they did not want their child(ren) to have to come to prison and be searched and see their father 'that way'. Some visits by friends seemed to be functional rather than personal because they had to bring goods to prison: clothes or contraband.

3.5 SOCIAL SITUATION

Living situation

Half of the sample came from broken families, growing up without one (mostly the father) or even both parents. Also, a few others mentioned that although their parents were still together, they were raised by their mother since their father was mostly absent for various reasons. Almost half of the sample lived with (one of) their parents before they were imprisoned for the current sentence. Eight out of 28 men had some form of independent housing such as renting a single room or an apartment before they got imprisoned; another five lived together with a partner before they got arrested for the current offence. Simon and Leon mentioned they were living with a relative before imprisonment, such as an aunt.

Table 3.3 shows the living situation at the two follow-ups after release. The most common living options immediately after release were with (one of the) parents and in sheltered living facilities, but this share decreased up to 12 months after release when more men obtained a form of independent housing. However, this also included more informal housing such as illegal subletting a room. Except for one, all men who had their own place before prison had to give it up at some point during their imprisonment. Casper was the only one who managed to secure his house by giving a legal permission for someone else to stay in his house until his release. As a result, he could return to his own house at the day of his release. Ten out of 23 men experienced at least one change in their living situation during the period from three months to one year after release: sometimes this was for the better when going from a sheltered living facility to finding independent housing, but sometimes it went downwards, at first sleeping here and there to even someone eventually becoming homeless at the time of the last follow-up interview. For Bart and Wessel, both the three months follow-up and the one year follow-up interviews took place in prison. They lived at a friend's place and in a sheltered living facility for a short while before they were rearrested for a new (serious) crime.

Partner

Half of the sample was involved in an intimate relationship (often for multiple years) before the current prison spell and mentioned their relationship to be of importance to them. Charles and Peter said to be married to their partners. However, for most (10 out of 14) the relationship stranded when they were imprisoned for the current crime.

Three men whose partners stayed with them through their prison spell and in the first months after release, saw this relationship being terminated in the months that followed. Peter said this partner did not 'fit' him anymore, he was having doubts already before prison; Roy did not want to be bound by his relationship and Tom was slowly falling back into his old criminal behaviour which was not appreciated by his partner. All three were single one year after release after being in a multiple year relationship. Ab was the only participant that was in the same relationship as he was before imprisonment and stayed with her throughout the research period. He said their bond became stronger and at the final follow-up, his girlfriend just gave birth to their first child, although he was back in prison and had to wait a few more weeks before he could hold his daughter for the first time. Three months after release, 17 out of 24 men were single and a year after release, this number was 13 out of 23.

Children

The sample consisted of 11 fathers who collectively had 18 children. Most of them reported a good relationship with their children and saw them on a weekly or even daily basis before they got imprisoned, although none of them actually lived with their child (except for Roy who lived with his girlfriend and her son who he regarded as his stepson).

Most fathers in the sample (i.e. Dave, Vince, Isaac, Casper, Jack, Tom) felt they were not able to maintain and invest in the contact with their child(ren) during imprisonment. According to them, this was related to being imprisoned again and 'screwing' up chances to remain in contact with their child(ren). For example, the mother of Vince's daughter was clear that if he would ever be arrested again, he would not be allowed to see her for a while. So Vince spend his imprisonment without seeing his daughter, while the bond before imprisonment was good and she seemed to be quite important to him. Dave and Isaac had also decided they did not want their child to come to prison and see them 'that way'. Whatever the reasons might be, at the end of the prison spells, some fathers (i.e. Wessel, Tony, Jack, Vince, Dave, Tom) had not seen their child(ren) for a few years, yet they mentioned to have a good relationship with them and expected to continue this bond after release. Nevertheless, only a few participants (Isaac, Dave, Vince) were actually able to create a strong bond with their children a year after release. The rest found themselves fighting custody battles, negotiating visitation rights or simply retracting from their child's life to be able to progress in their own. One year after release, Milo was about

to be a father and Ab just became one and for both, this seemed to be a significant moment contributing to feelings of maturity and responsibility (although one was refraining from and the other one continuing crime).

Table 3.2. *Descriptive characteristics of the sample before imprisonment (N=28)*

	Age	Background	Living situation	Partner	Children	Employment	First time imprisonment
Aaron	30-34	Western	Independent	Yes	0	Formal	No
Ab	20-24	Non-Western	Parent(s)	Yes	0	No	No
Casper	35-39	Western	Independent	No	3	Informal	Yes
Charles	20-24	Non-Western	Independent	Yes	0	No	No
Dave	20-24	Non-Western	Parent(s)	No	1	Education	Yes
Leon	20-24	Non-Western	Relative	Yes	1	No	No
Peter	50-54	Western	Independent	Yes	1	Formal	Yes
Richard	20-24	Non-Western	Independent	No	0	No	No
Tom	30-34	Non-Western	Independent	Yes	2	No	No
Tony	20-24	Non-Western	Parent(s)	No	1	No	No
Bart	30-34	Western	Parent(s)	No	0	No	No
Chris	25-29	Western	Independent	No	0	Informal	No
Isaac	30-34	Non-Western	Independent	No	4	No	No
Jack	25-29	Non-Western	Independent	No	1	No	No
Kay	25-29	Non-Western	Independent	No	0	No	No
Martin	20-24	Non-Western	Parent(s)	No	0	No	No
Milo	25-29	Non-Western	Independent	Yes	0	No	No
Nathan	20-24	Non-Western	Parent(s)	No	0	Education	No
Nick	20-24	Western	Parent(s)	Yes	0	No	Yes
Oscar	20-24	Non-Western	Parent(s)	Yes	0	No	Yes
Pascal	30-34	Western	Independent	Yes	0	Formal	No
Roy	25-29	Non-Western	Independent	Yes	1	No	No
Rudy	25-29	Non-Western	Parent(s)	No	0	No	No
Sam	20-24	Non-Western	Parent(s)	Yes	0	No	No
Simon	20-24	Non-Western	Relative	Yes	0	No	No
Vince	25-29	Western	Parent(s)	No	1	No	No
Wessel	20-24	Western	Parent(s)	No	2	No	No
Xavier	20-24	Non-Western	Parent(s)	Yes	0	Formal	No

Employment & education

All men completed elementary school with just a few finishing high school. Many eventually got suspended from school and they themselves mentioned they were not good learners or they were just not interested in school. This feeling could exacerbate when someone from the neighbourhood told them how to make fast money when resources at home were scarce. A few men stated they were convinced they had the brains to finish an education and also made attempts towards starting one. For example, Richard had successfully entered a 21+ test in the past, which someone can take to 'prove' they are qualified for higher education when lacking an official degree.

Three months after release, nine out of 24 men found some form of formal employment or started an education. In addition, Jack and Vince were involved in informal work, yet not illegal by criminal law. Almost all of them managed to stay employed or in school in the months following up to 12 months after release. Formal work areas included industrial jobs such as construction work or in a butchery, but also more service oriented job such as working as a cook, in a call centre or visiting consumers for their cable TV connections. Most men who found a legit job (Dave, Milo, Nathan, Richard), felt they had much more to offer and that the job did not make use of all their capacities. However, they were pleased to be working, having something to do, earning money and realised it was a good opportunity for people with a criminal record, but without a diploma. Getting up early to go to work and working for a boss were not experienced as difficulties. Also, there was a sense of pride in finding a job shortly after release as this was sometimes mentioned to be a high point in the past few months after release.

Some men who were unemployed at the three months follow-up reported difficulties in finding a job related to their criminal record, lack of diplomas and/or meeting the supervision requirements, but in general, almost half of the sample admitted during the interview that they were not keen on working immediately after release and needed some time to adjust. As a result, they did not put too much effort in writing letters for jobs and seeking work opportunities.

Drugs alcohol

Half of the sample used cannabis and almost all of these users were daily users in their lives before the current imprisonment. Aside from cannabis, five out of 28 men mentioned to be regular users of hard drugs such as XTC, cocaine and/or speed at parties and get-togethers. No one said to be a heavy drinker, but almost all men occasionally consumed alcohol on parties.

Table 3.3. Descriptive characteristics of the sample after imprisonment (N=24).

	Living situation		Partner		Children		Employment	
	T2	T3	T2	T3	T2	T3	T2	T3
Ab	Parent(s)	Prison	Yes	Yes	0	1	No	No
Casper	Independent	Independent	No	No	3	3	No	No
Dave	Parent(s)	Parent(s)	No	No	1	1	Formal	Formal
Leon	Living facility	Informal housing	No	Yes	1	1	No	No
Peter	Independent	Independent	Yes	No	1	1	Formal	Formal
Richard	Living facility	Abroad	Yes	NA	0	NA	Formal	NA
Tom	Relative	Homeless	Yes	No	2	2	Formal	No
Tony	Parent(s)	Informal housing	No	No	1	1	No	No
Bart	Other	Prison	No	No	0	0	No	No
Chris	Living facility	Living facility	No	Yes	0	0	No	Formal
Isaac	Living facility	Relative	No	No	4	4	No	No
Jack	Living facility	Relative	No	No	1	1	Informal	Informal
Martin	Parent(s)	Prison	No	No	0	0	No	No
Milo	Partner	Independent	Yes	Yes	0	0	Formal	Formal
Nathan	Parent(s)	Parent(s)	No	No	1	1	Formal	Formal
Oscar	Living facility	Independent	Yes	Yes	0	0	No	No
Pascal	Independent	Independent	No	Yes	0	0	No	Formal
Roy	Partner	Informal housing	Yes	No	1 ³	0	No	No
Rudy	Living facility	Parent(s)	No	No	0	0	No	No
Sam	Parent(s)	Parent(s)	Yes	Yes	0	0	Education	Formal
Simon	Living facility	Living facility	Yes	No	0	0	Formal	No
Vince	Parent(s)	Parent(s)	No	Yes	1	1	Informal	Informal
Wessel	Living facility	Prison	No	No	2	2	No	No
Xavier	Living facility	Living facility	No	No	0	0	Education	Education

At the post-release interview three months after release, 12 out of 24 men were (still) using marijuana and all of these men were using on a daily basis. A year after release, 13 out of 23 men were smoking marijuana on a daily basis and both Pascal and Vince had experienced a relapse in the past months concerning cocaine and XTC, but quit again at the time of the final interview. The majority of the men who were smoking on a daily basis also assessed their use as very high, but only Tom

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 3 Roy's girlfriend had a son of who he said to see him as his stepson. At the final interview, Roy and his girlfriend broke up and he was not in contact with her son anymore.

claimed he was addicted to it and that he needed help. Furthermore, most men claimed to be recreational drinkers with the exception of Xavier, Pascal and Tom who experienced problems with alcohol in the past.

3.6 CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

The large majority of the sample (20 out of 28) reported to have grown up in quite criminal surroundings, embedded in life on the streets and acting out or showing deviant behaviour starting in puberty, getting into (group) violence, stealing and dealing. Some of them already contacted the criminal justice system when they were minors, but for most, they were convicted for the first time when they were adults. Xavier, Nathan, Sam, Leon, Martin and Richard entered prison for their current sentence before the age of 20. For Dave, Peter, Casper, Oscar and Nick, it was their first prison spell. The rest had spent multiple times in (a foreign) prison and/or in juvenile correctional facilities. A few men had already experienced a relatively longer term imprisonment, however, for most men this was the first time they were locked up for a *long* periods of time. The offences they were convicted for in the past varied from simple thefts, drug dealing and violent fights to more serious crime such as armed robberies and attempted manslaughter.

Criminal behaviour after release (n=9)

The nature of the crimes the men were involved in after release (n=9) varied from dealing drugs to more serious crimes such as forgery, robberies, rip deals, extortion and attempted manslaughter. Possibly due to supervision, crime in the first few months after release mostly comprised dealing drugs and evolved to more serious violent crime a year after release. One participant became a suspect in a rape-case at the final interview and another one confessed his contribution to a kidnap. At the post-release interview shortly after release (T2), Jack, Bart, Wessel, Rudy and Leon were back in prison. At the final interview (T3), Bart, Wessel, Martin and Ab were awaiting their trial with regard to a new serious crime and some anticipated a long-term sentence again.

LIFE STORY 2 PERSISTER ‘DOOMED TO DEVIANCE?’

WHO IS WESSEL?

At our first encounter, Wessel was 26 years, had Dutch ethnic roots, and had been sentenced to four years in prison for a serious violent crime. He was convicted six times for mostly violent crimes such as assault, aggravated theft, attempted manslaughter. He sighed when I asked him how many years of his life he had already done time as his answer was eight or nine years ‘clean’. He described himself as being humorous and someone who does not take life too seriously. He likes to work out at the gym and said he is a very ‘tidy’ person, washing his hands all day long and keeping his cell clean.

Background

Wessel’s childhood featured a lot of violence, drugs and neglect. He grew up with a father who was a big shot criminal, actively involved in trafficking drugs and weapons and “everyone knew who he was”. Although his father was always in and out of prison, Wessel does recall him attending his Holy Communion under the supervision of two policemen carrying guns: “I grew up with the idea that the police is the enemy, because it was always associated with arresting my dad”. He was raised by his mother, who was never criminally active, yet she had her own share of problems with alcohol and drugs. Wessel said his parents had an intense love-hate relationship infused with a lot of violence. On several occasions, Wessel witnessed his father abusing his mother and at the age of 6, his father was convicted for a serious violent crime against his mother. His older brother was unmanageable and soon was placed into care. After his father decided to be with another woman, his jealousy driven mother jumped of the balcony and was seriously injured. She had to be hospitalized for months. Twelve year old Wessel then lived with his father and stepmother. Looking back, he felt that this was the point where it all went wrong. He had easy access to drugs (because drugs were always lying around at home for his father’s business) so he began stealing from his father and dealing at school. He got noticed by a violent group of older boys who were already involved in criminal activity and Wessel, provided them with drugs and mooched around them on a regular basis. He started to neglect school, doing drugs himself and got into a string of fights and thefts using weapons from the group supply. Informal social control was absent as his father was abroad for transporting drugs and was rarely at home.

When his father got imprisoned after being arrested for a large drug transport, Wessel was placed into custody of the court. He ended up in several assisted living facilities where he continued dealing drugs and became a heavy drinker. After his father's release, he went to live with him and his drug use became heavier, including cocaine and XTC. His father didn't know how to set an example and they did not have a normal father-son relationship: "sometimes I went downstairs, there were drugs on the table, there was a party. And my dad was very open, invited me to join. We did drugs together and we did crime together. Then the boundaries just fade away." When he was 16 and in his words "out of control", a fight with his father about past wrongdoings to his mother escalated and he assaulted him badly using a dangerous weapon. Wessel considered this an absolute low point in his life and still wonders how it got so out of hand. His heavy drinking, drug use and anger about the past culminated into this strong act of violence with Wessel trying to kill his father:

I got so emotional from using drugs. And then my dad used to say things like: 'what are you crying about, your mother is a whore, she shouldn't have worked in that club when I was in prison and this and that.' And that night [of the crime] I exploded. Even the police said: 'we have never visited a crime scene like this'. The blood was everywhere. But my dad, all covered up in bandages, actually defended me in court saying he provoked me. To me he said I was a man, he respected me for defending my mother.

Wessel was convicted for attempted murder and sent to juvenile detention for a long time. He felt it was the right thing at that time, otherwise he thought he might have killed someone. During an unsupervised leave, Wessel met a girl and got her pregnant. She denied it was his son and it was only after four years he discovered it was his after a DNA test. Wessel was released from juvenile detention combined with treatment at the age of 20. He had several jobs in a bakery and as a road worker and managed to stay out of prison for almost a year. During this time he met his ex-girlfriend in a local disco and soon after that, she got pregnant. He actually did not want to have kids, because of the life he was living: "It was not healthy for a child" and that is why he believed she tricked him by saying she was on birth control.

Current imprisonment

The crime Wessel was currently in for was attempted manslaughter. According to him, things got out of hand when he was hired to beat someone up to retrieve money, but when he arrived at the location he saw there were little children present. Wessel firmly stated he would never do anything violent with children around, recognizing they could get traumatized. When he was instructed to "put the children in the shower", he exploded and got into a fight using a chair and a gun. Wessel admitted

he was drunk at the time this happened and that when he drinks, he should not be provoked. Wessel fled the crime scene and was on a run a few weeks when he realised he could not live that way. He returned to his mother with a bottle of rum and sat on the couch until 15 minutes later the police stormed in. Wessel was convicted to four years in prison.

In Wessel's view, the criminal world exists parallel to the 'normal' world and therefore, he did not declare anything at trial: "I know my side of the story, that is enough. Criminal activities... you have to keep it between the criminals involved. Don't rat out at the police station. I can't look myself in the eye if I would do that". Soon after the conviction, his father died but Wessel was not allowed to go to his funeral and he recalled how difficult it was for him to cope with the situation while being imprisoned. He suffered from panic attacks, anxiety, screamed in the middle of the night and was transferred to a special care unit.

About imprisonment, Wessel says: "I can do time easily. When I'm inside, I'm inside. I don't call a lot, I don't need visitors." He reported to have a good relationship with other inmates and with prison staff and took pride in the special job he had on the floor. A few years after his father died, his mother committed suicide. This was also a very difficult time for Wessel. He was allowed an unsupervised leave to go to her funeral, but then relapsed with alcohol and drugs. It all went so fast, and he tries not to think about it, but: "I think when I'm out and I won't see my father and mother... I think I will struggle."

Being part of the rehabilitation programme he participated in, he finished a Choose for Change course, which he didn't perceive as valuable. He explained his point of view by questioning what they were really going to do for him when he got out. Knowing what to do and what not to do is easy on paper, but in practice it isn't all that easy, although he felt that is how they presented it in the course.

Towards the end of his imprisonment, Wessel was allowed to go on leave yet all 10 addresses he selected were declined. Apparently, the people living at these addresses were involved in criminal activity or had been in the past and therefore, unsuitable to serve as a valid address. As a result, Wessel has not seen the outside world since the start of his incarceration (except for a few days to attend his mother's funeral). He did not share the opinion of the system that there were risks involved when he would contact his old criminal network again:

The last address I reported was my nephew's. The last criminal thing he did was in 2013! And that was about growing marijuana, I don't even think that is a bad crime. You see, the coffee shops can sell, but we are not allowed to grow.... That doesn't make sense!

Pre-release expectations

Not being granted any leaves, Wessel foresaw the impact it would have on him upon release. He mentioned fear that it would all be too much, entering society after all these years without any money, no father, no mother, no brother (who was imprisoned abroad), working all of a sudden. Wessel expressed a desire to try and do it the normal way in the context of his conditional release and he wanted to quit violent crime, because: "you don't gain anything. Being inside is just being inside. The world outside continues and you won't see your children grow older. I also want to have my life outside now, I've had my share of trouble." However, he did not envision a life without any crime. In this context, he revealed he was never arrested for drug related crimes (which underscores the importance of adding data from narratives to official crime records to understand the process of desistance), so he saw his future continue in that direction. But he was well aware of his weaknesses: being drawn to the seduction of crime and not being able to say 'no', being unstable and unpredictable, having a preference for expensive clothes and willingly searching for risky situations involving alcohol and drugs. As part of his conditional release and in an attempt to part from the violent criminal world, he made a decision to leave his old town and applied for an intensive rehabilitation programme on a farm. As we shall see, this optimism turned into fatalism quickly after release, resulting in Wessel's self-sabotage and reoffending.

First months out – transitioning from prison to society

After 35 months of imprisonment (and without any previous leaves), Wessel was conditionally released and placed at the farm. He tried to get used to the electronic ankle bracelet and to function in a law abiding context which demanded conformity, but it was not long before he lapsed into his old behaviour:

He [the farmer] thought working is the solution for everything. But I was inside for so many years and outside I don't work, so this was hard on me. My hands ached, everywhere. [...] It was difficult for me, I didn't feel happy there, I was sitting at their dinner table... I lost my father, my mother ... I didn't want to be there, you know. [...] There was no connection at all [with the farmer] and he admitted he set the bar very high. We were supposed to have a talk.... because yeah, I overslept you know... I went out drinking too much, found a nearby dealer.

Wessel confessed he purposely used drugs in order to get away from the farm and to be admitted into a clinic. However, because he refused to go to a clinic earlier during his prison spell, he first had to go back to prison to be examined. Panicked by the news of having to return to prison, he cut off his electronic monitoring device

and fled. He immediately entered the criminal life again of producing and dealing drugs and being involved in violent rip deals. He also started dating a girl whom he had known a long time. Three months after release, he was arrested for another serious violent crime in her home. He expected to be sentenced to 12 years in prison: "Anything less would be positive". About re-entering prison, he revealed: "it might sound strange, but a feeling of calmness came over me when I walked in".

Wessel had seen one of his children when he was out, but had already lost contact now he was in prison again explaining the mother of the kids (who had problems of her own) would never pick up the phone when he called. He said to keep trying, but that he had not seen his other son for such a long time, he realised the value of the bond with his children was decreasing, having less impact:

You see, everyone keeps saying: 'think about your kids'. But if you don't have a bond with them you really have to see him to realise the value. A picture will not help. You have to hold your child. I do not have a connection with him, I know that. Sometimes I feel guilty, but yeah, than I think it's easy to say: do it for your kids, when you don't feel connected to them.

Thinking about the future, Wessel is quite pessimistic and mentioned that he had shut it out a bit in order to be able to get through. He wanted to make the best of it, but the only option in which he could see himself parting from crime if when his girlfriend would wait for him, although this seemed to be more a form of wishful thinking.

Process of reintegration – a year after release

At the time of the third interview, Wessel was still incarcerated facing another long-term sentence. When the prison staff instructed him to go to the private room where I was waiting for him, he thought his lawyer was present. But when they mentioned the university, he knew it was me. He apologized for not being showered and explained he just came from a training session in the gym. He was currently reading the book *Papillon*, about a prisoner wrongly accused and sentenced to life.

A few months before this interview, Wessel was subjected to psychiatric and psychological tests and the report read he was a psychopath needing excitement and seeking for thrills. When asked if he recognized himself in these words, he replied:

There is some truth in that, but yeah, I have to in that [criminal] world, that is how it goes. But outside, I would never ever do that [assault] to a 'normal' person [...] but yeah, in that criminal world, yeah, I do that. Maybe by losing my father and mother and everything I grew up in, maybe it is a part of my character now. It has done something to me.

When reflecting on how this crime could happen so soon after he was released from prison, he linked this to his state of mind at that time, which in his view originated from the difficulties at the farm which was not what he expected. It also still bothered him that he was not granted any leaves for it impeded opportunities to get used to society. According to him, to ventilate all this suppressed anger and frustration he fell back into his old script using drugs again. He knew he was not doing well and things exploded when he heard he had to go back to prison.

Being 'in' for a while now, prison is familiar ground to him. He got into a prison he already spent time in before, so he knew the guards and other prison staff which he seems to prefer over life outside prison walls: "Out there you are on the run and you are not in touch with your children, with no one, it's a hard life outside. In here I have my people, I know everyone and it's sociable. I know what it's like to do time, I don't have any problems with it. [...] It's been like this all my life." He was clean for some time now.

He broke up with his girlfriend after a few visits from her side, but he immediately added that although he had known her his whole life, they only started dating two or three weeks before he was arrested: "It was not that serious, no deep love or anything and I don't miss her". He also completely lost contact with his children, stating that the minute he is in prison, he shuts off all connections to life outside the walls.

Wessel felt he was reaching out for help to cope with all the things from his past. He knew about himself that when he was not feeling well, he turned to drugs. Inside it is easy for him to refrain from using drugs, but outside it is a different story. However, he had the feeling he did not get the aid he wanted and that they abandoned him: "I really want to get help, to process all of this [past]. But nothing has been done. They don't see me. The psychiatrist also didn't listen to me when I said I needed help." He felt that if got help to deal with his current problems, he was able to influence negative future events. In the tests, they also established his low IQ and the lack of specific skills, so Wessel knew he needed to work on this.

Future

Envisioning the future is difficult for him, since he will be in prison for quite some time for this new crime. He expresses no regrets about the decisions he made though when he summarizes: "when the lights go out, no one knows who you are". He also admits (and hereby agreeing with the psychological diagnosis) that his need for excitement and adrenaline fuels his deviant behaviour and gets him into trouble. Worst-case scenario would be if he turns into a junkie, being homeless or in a shelter. This is quite a realistic image, so he was taking steps to be clean. Despite past traumatic

experiences, continuous criminal behaviour across different stages in his life and a new long-term imprisonment, Wessel felt content. When asked to describe himself in three words at our last encounter, he claimed to be happy, peaceful and healthy:

Yeah... I'm happy. This is my life. I'm actually pretty satisfied with how things are going, I don't have much to complain. It's fine like this." For the future, he expressed the desire to have a house of his own, a nice girl and being able to take care of himself.

Future plans included building some boxes to grow cannabis, because this was something his family had always been involved in and he saw no harm in supplying coffee shops. He explicitly mentioned he did not want to quit crime and he could not imagine quitting. When I asked him if he had any boundaries, he sighed and said:

I have very few boundaries. If someone would call me to shoot someone for 50K [thousand] ... I would do it. Not that I'm planning to do it [laughs ashamed]! But when I look ahead and you ask me if I have boundaries and when I think about that, I think I have very few. [...] I would never shoot someone innocent, but someone in this [criminal] world. It's part of it. And I would never do it when there is a kid around.



