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Finnish supervised probationary freedom as support for a desistance from crime

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Abstract

Electronic monitoring enables different, more transparent and open ways of enforcing sentences. This study examines Finnish Supervised Probationary Freedom (SPF) from the perspective of a desistance from crime. We analyze what meanings sentenced people give to SPF in terms of their desistance from crime, adopting the viewpoints of moderate social constructionism and rhetorical analysis. The research data was collected from interviews of 26 people who had experience with SPF. According to the results, SPF supervision and participation in SPF activities can create a framework for practicing a crime- and drug-free life. The person's own desire to desist is the starting point. Support provided by prison and probation employees appears to be central to the construction of a new identity. Support from social work is necessary to complete SPF, and NGO support enhances reintegration into society during the SPF. However, the opportunities on offer for reentry are limited.

Keywords

Supervised probationary freedom, desistance from crime, electronic monitoring, social interaction, social support, social work, NGO

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Introduction

Electronic monitoring (EM) and sentences served outside prison have increased significantly in recent years, and aim to promote the reintegration of incarcerated people into society and prevent recidivism (Graham and McIvor, 2015). The supervision of such sentences has developed a dual goal which firstly aims to protect society, while at the same time supervising people serving these types of sentences (Durnescu et al., 2013). But notably, EM has been found to have positive effects on social life, work, the experience of freedom, and also the psychological factors of the person under EM (Vanhaelemeesch et al., 2014).

However, there has also been criticism of EM related to issues of ethics, privacy, and stigmatization. On one hand, EM has been criticized as being too soft and free (see Nellis, 2014). But on the other hand, EM has been seen as a form of sentence that makes the punishment more severe by extending social control even deeper into a person's privacy (Jones, 2014). Criticism has also been extended to the stigmatizing effect of visible tracking devices, and as a punishment that discriminates due to its requirements related to housing and work (Graham and McIvor, 2015; Jones, 2014; Nellis, 2014). Nevertheless, despite these critical comments, the importance of executing punishments using EM has increased in many countries, including Finland.

The Finnish criminal penal system has been developed towards achieving a more open enforcement of sentences by using EM in the execution of sentences. One example of this is the Finnish system of Supervised Probationary Freedom (SPF), which aims to maintain and promote the incarcerated person's ability to integrate into society through planned and gradual release, as well as reduce recidivism (PPSF, 2013; The Probationary Liberty under Supervision Act 629, 2013). A significant number of Finnish incarcerated people are released through SPF, and in 2022, the number of completed SPF was 773, when the total number of sentenced prisoners released from prison was 2714 (PPSF, 2022).

In addition to the international EM debate, some features of the Nordic model of criminal justice can be seen as the background behind the large-scale introduction of SPF. Researchers talk about Scandinavian exceptionalism which refers to the low rate of imprisonment and humane prison conditions, which is based on general social equality and a welfare state in accordance with universal social policy (Lappi-Seppälä, 2019; Pratt, 2008). In accordance with the normalization principle, the aim is to ensure that conditions during imprisonment are as close as possible to conditions outside prison (Engbo, 2017; van de Rijt et al., 2023). SPF clearly represents this goal of normalization.

On the other hand, consistent with the recent atmosphere of Finnish criminal policy, SPF has been developed specifically from the point of view of reducing the risk of recidivism, and not so much from the point of view of a welfare state orientation or client-centered social work (see Harrikari and Westerholm, 2015). The statistics also provide preliminary indications that SPF is effective in preventing recidivism. For example, the rate of recidivism within 5 years was 33.8% for those released through SPF in 2017, while it was 52.8% for all those released in same year (PPSF, 2023). But front-door EM (i.e., EM-sentences and EM-enforcement) has not become very common in Finland, even though a recent Norwegian study has found that front-door EM can be used to reduce recidivism and promote desistance (Andersen and Telle, 2022).

In 2006, SPF was enacted for the first time through The Imprisonment Act 767, 2005, and in 2014, a special law on SPF (The Probationary Liberty under Supervision Act 629, 2013) came into force. According to the Act, incarcerated people can be placed in SPF for a maximum of 6 months before their regular release on parole. The person in SPF must have an apartment that is suitable for completing their SPF or be placed in another suitable place such as a rehabilitation unit. The Probationary Liberty under Supervision Act (629, 2013, § 5) specifies that "a person placed on SPF must participate in supervision meetings, do work or participate in education, rehabilitation, activity programs or other similar activities that maintain or promote their functional capacity and social skills." The completion of SPF requires compliance with a designated weekly schedule and home arrival times. During SPF, in addition to EM, the absence of intoxicants is monitored through unannounced drug tests, supervision visits by a supervision patrol at a person's workplace, school, rehabilitation unit or apartment, and through supervision meetings in prison (PPSF, 2013; The Probationary Liberty under Supervision Act 629, 2013).

This study examines people's experiences of SPF, their views on gradual release, and especially the Finnish system of SPF from the perspective of a desistance from crime. We ask what meanings do sentenced people give to SPF in terms of their desistance from crime and approach this question from a qualitative research perspective by interviewing people who have experienced SPF.

Theoretical framework

The process of desistance and the significance of external factors in desistance from crime

As a concept, desistance from crime means refraining from criminal behavior or a criminal lifestyle (Anderson and McNeill, 2019; Farrall, 2002; Giordano et al., 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001). Desistance from crime can take place through single sudden life events (Farrall and Calverley, 2006), chains of events, or it can progress slowly with maturation (Laub and Sampson, 2001). However, desistance from crime can also appear as a back-and-forth movement between criminal and non-criminal behavior (Kazemian, 2007). The process of desistance can be considered to include three different aspects. Primary desistance means that the individual stops or takes a break from committing crime, while secondary desistance is seen as a more permanent state of non-criminality involving a transition to a non-criminal identity (Anderson and McNeill, 2019; Kirkwood, 2023). Tertiary desistance in turn relates to changes that reflect belonging to the community (McNeill and Schinkel, 2016), as well as a recognition of change from others and access to social resources in society (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

According to Fox (2022), there are multiple explanations for desistance that consider external stabilizing influences on internal identity shifts and their interactions. Giordano et al. (2002) state that the starting point of desistance is cognitive transformation, where the actor's own role, readiness and desire to change is emphasized. Together, cognitive shifts and agentic moves support sustained behavioral change. On the other hand, it has also been pointed out that desistance requires a change in the person's social environment

and relationships (Anderson and McNeill, 2019; Weaver and McNeill, 2012). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) have highlighted that, for example, getting a job plays a central role in building a new identity, and also in terms of finding one's own place in society. According to Farrall (2002), the importance of the social context related to desistance is central, and a permanent job and apartment, as well as the person's initial motivation significantly predict desisting from crime. Giordano et al. (2002) use the concept of "hooks for change", through which they refer to potentially pro-social features of the environment which act as catalysts, change agents, causes, or even turning points (see also Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001). Practical help and mentoring provided by employees working with people with history of crime can also act as hooks for change (see Kirkwood, 2023). In Finnish studies, the roles of work, parenthood, marriage and co-habitation (Savolainen, 2009), as well as gaining employment, finding other daily routines, seeking help from others, and shifting surroundings (Villman, 2021) are identified to be significant in the process of desistance.

The significance of the support provided by prison and probation employees in terms of desistance

In several previous studies, the relationship between the person serving the sentence and the prison and probation employee has been found to be significant in supporting the individual's desistance from crime (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Järveläinen et al., 2021; McCulloch, 2005; Shapland et al., 2012; Todd-Kvam, 2020). For example, in probation, the role of the supervisor (probation officer, case manager, case worker) is seen as a key element in supporting the person's separation from crime, when they offer advice, solve problems, help in practical matters, create hope and faith, and motivate the client to stay on track (Anderson and McNeill, 2019; Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Farrall, 2014; Järveläinen et al., 2021; Shapland et al., 2012). According to Farrall (2014), probation has a long-term effect on desistance, where conversations with probation officers during supervision plant the "seeds for change", which bare fruit from the perspective of desistance only later in the probationer's life. This also requires the probationer's own motivation to change and make wider changes in their individual life. In contrast, findings on the prison context are contradictory. On the one hand, prison employees can strengthen incarcerated people's feelings of equality, respect, and trust through reciprocal relationships (Andvig et al., 2021), and on the other hand, incarcerated people have encountered various conflicts or situations involving power structures, which have resulted in a negative attitude towards various authorities (Crewe et al., 2015), and thus the prison employee's opportunities to support the incarcerated person are limited.

Different views have also been presented on what kinds of interactive interventions support desistance. According to Fox (2022), the choice of interventions is also connected to which factors we assume to be key drivers in desistance. Stabilizing external factors such as employment and family relationships can be promoted with job or relationship counseling, or by training in work skills. Ways of thinking and the individual's cognitive processes and identity can also be influenced by way of social support and the motivation and empowerment provided by employees. However, the best opportunities for the

formation of social capital are offered by the comprehensive circle of pro-social support upon reentry, which simultaneously takes into account external and internal factors. In-line with this thinking, Farrall (2004) suggests that probation services should be more focused on increasing individuals' social capital, which requires comprehensive social support both for internal identity change and for obtaining a legitimate employment.

Support measures of social work for reintegration into society

SPF includes various stabilizing external factors and activities that can promote desistance, as well as the possibility to receive support from prison and probation employees during supervision visits and meetings. In addition, necessary support measures are provided for each person for the period of their SPF, as well as service continuums after the end of the sentence, which play a central role in their desistance process. Incarcerated people are one of the most marginalized populations, facing economic challenges, as well as difficulties with substance use, mental health, and learning (Joukamaa and Work Group, 2010; Tuominen, 2018), and thus their return to society requires comprehensive support. In Finland, public social work and numerous third-sector operators are responsible for cooperatively carrying out social work with people with a history of crime.

Social work aims to promote the client's well-being, participation, empowerment, and self-advocacy (Croft et al., 2004). In social work, the client's needs for different services are assessed and sufficient resources are offered (Järveläinen et al., 2021; Raitakari and Berger, 2016), and if necessary, they are helped to contact other service providers (Wikoff et al., 2012). Returning a person with a history of crime to society requires the removal of serious practical obstacles related to unemployment, homelessness, a lack of education, difficulty in accessing substance abuse programs, and also financial challenges (Shapland et al., 2012). Thus, desisting from crime requires the provision of sufficient opportunities and support measures to individuals so that they can become part of society (e.g., McNeill and Schinkel, 2016; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). However, according to Todd-Kvam (2020), probationers face serious challenges related to the complexity and dysfunction of the welfare state, which makes it difficult for them to integrate back into society.

The third sector also plays a central role in helping vulnerable people and returning citizens (Kaufman, 2015; Weaver and McNeill, 2012). In Finland, third-sector operators (NGOs, foundations, and associations) especially focused on services for people with a history of crime offer versatile assistance alongside the public sector (Salovaara, 2020). The importance of peers in supporting a person's desistance from crime (Croux et al., 2021) has also been identified as a key element in the operating models of these NGOs and foundations (see e.g., Salovaara, 2020), and people with a lived experience are engaged in designing and delivering services (Buck et al., 2022). Additionally, the individual's creation of new relationships and belonging to a community (and thereby also being a part of society) plays a central role in the tertiary desistance (McNeill and Schinkel, 2016; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). In Finland, SPF is often carried out in third-sector units which combine, for example, substance abuse rehabilitation, social rehabilitation, supported work or rehabilitative work, apprenticeship training, housing, and peer support (Järveläinen et al., 2021). In this case, the prison and probation employees are responsible

for the legal implementation of the SPF and the related supervision, while the NGOs are responsible for the day-to-day support, and for example, substance abuse rehabilitation of persons placed in SPF.

Method and material

Methodological approach and research question

The methodology of this study follows the approaches of social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003) and rhetorical analysis (Billig, 1987). According to social constructionism, social reality is constructed through social practices, and especially through social interaction and language use. In accordance with moderate social constructionism, we assume that people's speech also describes and reflects their social reality, and the interviews and data analysis featured in this article were based on Billig's (1987) rhetorical approach where the object of examination is argumentation, which includes statements, taking a position on them, and justifications. In practice, argumentative speech has been elicited using the methodology of qualitative attitude approach, where ready-made attitude statements are used as stimuli in the research interviews.

In this study, we ask what meanings do sentenced people give to SPF in terms of their desistance from crime. Here we analyze the importance of different factors related to SPF in terms of the different aspects of desistance. Particularly, we examine how the SPF's external framework, encounters with prison and probation employees, and social work support an abstinence from crime, the construction of a non-criminal identity, and a reintegration into society during and at the end of the SPF.

Data

Twenty-six persons who were currently or had formerly been in SPF and also had experience of social work (public social work or NGOs) participated in the study. Interviewees were recruited from different parts of Finland (Southern Finland $n = 16$, Western Finland $n = 5$, Eastern and Northern Finland $n = 5$). The implementation of the interviews was agreed with participating open prisons and a release unit of the Prison and Probation Service of Finland (PPSF). The directors of these units appointed employees who recruited voluntary participants for the study. In addition, interviewees were recruited through the authors' research-related networks. The interviews were conducted during the fall of 2019 in several NGOs, interviewee workplaces, a release unit, an open prison, or a university. The duration of the interviews varied from 28 to 90 min (average 52 min).

Of the interviewees, four were women and 22 were men. 17 had completed SPF and nine were in the process of completing it. In addition, three were currently serving a prison sentence in the release unit. The interviewees were aged between 24 and 67 years (average age 42 years). They had from one to 17 convictions, of which 13 had at least five convictions, and six were first-offenders. All of the interviewees had a basic education,

15 had vocational education either completed or in progress, and two had a higher education. Also, six had completed expert-by-experience training.

At the time of interview, 13 were employed in NGOs, foundations, projects, or as an entrepreneur. Three were on a work trial, two were unemployed, two were retired, and one participated in substance abuse rehabilitation. As part of SPF's mandatory activity, 19 interviewees had substance abuse rehabilitation or peer groups (NA, AA) included within their weekly program. 20 of the interviewees had one to three children. Since the interviews were conducted in Finnish, Finnish-speaking participants were selected for the study, three of whom had a different ethnic background.

Instrument

The data was collected using a qualitative attitude approach (Peltola and Vesala, 2013; Pyysiäinen and Vesala, 2013; Vesala and Rantanen, 2007). In the interview situation, we presented statements to the interviewees, which served as a conversation starter and stimulus. The idea is that these statements are controversial and provoke views both for and against the statement. With the help of the statements, we aimed to identify what people valued when they commented on the statements presented to them. SPF is often conducted in different NGOs, and the person performing SPF should also be offered necessary social services and support from public social work services and NGOs. Accordingly, in this study, we analyze statements related to the themes of support and supervision in the contexts of SPF and social work. The presented statements were: (1) "*Support and supervision related to SPF support desisting from crime*" and (2) "*Support and control related to social work support desisting from crime*." The first statement focuses on the significance of SPF's external framework and the social support provided by prison and probation employees in terms of desistance. The second statement is related to the significance of the support offered by public social work and NGOs. For the first statement, the term "supervision" was used to refer to the control related to the sentence according to the law, while for the second statement, the term "control" refers to control that serves the goals of social work (e.g., requiring documents related to the processing of the social assistance application, or drug testing as part of substance abuse rehabilitation). The first statement proved to be easy to understand for the interviewees, but the second statement required the aforementioned clarification of what control meant in the context of public social work. The interviewees had no problem understanding the expression *desisting from crime* used in both statements.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed according to the qualitative attitude approach, where the analysis proceeds through the phases of classification and interpretation (Peltola and Vesala, 2013; Pyysiäinen and Vesala, 2013; Vesala and Rantanen, 2007). In the classifying analysis, both statements were analyzed separately. In the analysis, attention was paid to whether interviewees took a positive, reserved, or opposing position in their stances, and what

kinds of justifications and explanations were presented in relation to the position in question. In this way, the interviewees could therefore present several positions related to the statement and their justifications, and could change the position from which they addressed the statement (e.g., as a client, an incarcerated person, or a person in SPF) (see Vesala and Rantanen, 2007).

In relation to the first statement "*Support and supervision related to SPF support desisting from crime*," the majority of interviewees (20) saw SPF as a fully functional sentence, whose content, supervision, and support played a key role in giving up crime. The justifications of interviewees with reserved positions (4) emphasized an inadequacy of the provided services related to SPF and personal motivation. The justifications of negative positions (2) emphasized the surveillance related to SPF as restricting normal life, and the surveillance visits as stigmatizing. Regarding the second statement "*Support and control related to social work support desisting from crime*," those who took a positive position (7) highlighted successful meetings with the social worker and the positive support received by services. Those who took a reserved position (14) emphasized that the financial support offered by social work was necessary, but there were also tensions and shortcomings in social work that made it difficult for them to use social work's support services. Those who took a negative position (5) emphasized a lack of services, communication problems with the social worker, or their own reluctance to be a social work client.

After classifying positions and justifications, we examined the material through different concepts or theories which were relevant in terms of the research questions presented. In the interpretive analysis, SPF and the significance of social support was analyzed from the perspectives of primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance. In this way, we identified three interpretive categories related to the external framework of SPF, support received from prison and probation employees, and the support received from social work.

Ethical questions

The research followed practices and principles of research ethics defined by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2012; TENK, 2019). Research permission was granted on behalf of the Prison and Probation Service of Finland and three NGOs. The participants in the study were asked for their consent both verbally and in written form. The purpose of the study was described to the interviewee, and it was specified that participation in the interviews was voluntary, and that each interviewee had the option to stop their participation at any stage of the study. It was further emphasized that the anonymity and right to self-determination of the interviewees would be respected, and in the analysis and reporting phases, the names of the interviewees were pseudonymized. By securing the anonymity of the interviewees and the neutral position of the interviewer in relation to the interviewees, we wanted to ensure that the interviewees could answer the statements truthfully and without fear of it affecting their position in completing the SPF.

Analysis and findings

SPF provides a framework for a crime-free life

Based on our findings, it seems that placing an incarcerated person on SPF outside of prison can promote a crime-free life. Most interviewees had quite a positive attitude towards SPF, which enabled a gradual release from prison. The obligation to participate in an activity (rehabilitation, training, or work), having a weekly schedule, and supervision play a key role here. In SPF, it was possible to practice a "normal" everyday life without any intoxicants, which created a good framework for life and kept the person away from crime.

> *"Yes, I see it (SPF) as support. It is possible for people to somehow live inside these frames. And a certain regular rhythm in life becomes familiar, which is realized while still being surrounded by all these temptations." Heini, female, 33 years*

Supervision is also central in SPF. EM, drug testing, and the daily surveillance phone calls in the mornings and evenings performed by the prison and probation employees act as an external motivator for being drug-free. Several interviewees accepted the control related to SPF as a matter of course, and it was seen mainly as a means of support.

> *"It's a question of attitude. If I had been in the mindset that I was trying to 'fool around', then it would have been annoying. If I had tried to use drugs, I would have been nervous about the drug tests, because you have to take breathalyzer tests. Then it would have been a limiting factor. But it worked just fine for me." Osku, male, 53 years old*

The above excerpt describes the importance of both internal motivation and external control for successfully completing SPF and being drug- and crime-free. The interviewees pointed out that desistance is above all a matter of attitude. However, in the critical comments, the use of an ankle-tag or supervision patrol visits in the workplace, school, or rehabilitation unit were also perceived as stigmatizing. Thus, in terms of the construction of a new non-criminal identity, control appeared to be a problematic issue. One of the interviewees was very critical of the apparent supervision related to SPF:

> *"Now, during SPF, you are not allowed to go to bars and live a normal life. It's like a punishment. (...) If someone wants to drink beer and smoke cannabis, they can do it even if they are under supervision. (...) Society wants (instead of being an entrepreneur) that I don't pay taxes, and wanted to make me an expensive citizen." Mikael, male, 30 years*

The activities featured in the content of sentenced people's SPF were based on their individual sentence plan and varied between rehabilitation, training, or work. These activities were seen to promote rehabilitation and reentry into the community. However, even though more than half of the interviewees had vocational training, access to jobs in the labor market and training was difficult. Only some of the interviewees continued to

work normally during SPF, when the supervision and strict rules related to SPF did not act as obstacles to normal everyday life.

> *"During my SPF, I had peer groups and such. Also, SPF helped me get attached here (to the workplace). It has worked for me (...) I kind of found my own place here like this. And then when the SPF ended, nothing changed. All the same routines which were ongoing during SPF are still there, (...) During SPF, I was able to create a place around me where I live, and that belongs to it." Osku, male, 53 years*

The above excerpt described everyday life defined by work, where finding one's place in society as a returning citizen became possible. For some, SPF also made it possible to return to their former workplace and maintain work and everyday routines. However, many interviewees pointed out that activities such as work or rehabilitation started during SPF should continue even after the SPF ends, so that the person does not drop out completely or drift back into crime in the critical release phase.

The end of supervision and the removal of the ankle-tag were also perceived as a critical stage. This caused concern among the interviewees in terms of maintaining their own motivation and coping with everyday life on their own. One interviewee emphasized that during SPF he needed to build good support networks for himself, so that necessary support measures would be available after release. Otherwise, after the ankle-tag was removed, he felt he would have been completely on "*thin ice*."

Overall, SPF was perceived as a helpful part of the Finnish penal system in terms of desistance. It allows a gradual release for incarcerated people and supports their cessation of criminal behavior. In particular, it seems that paid work performed during SPF is an effective element. However, while SPF-related supervision appears to be supportive of everyday life, it can also be seen as harmful from the point of view of the formation of a new identity.

Prison and probation employees as supporters in desistance from crime

SPF includes regular in-prison supervision meetings with prison employees who are responsible for rehabilitation or social work (senior instructors, social workers, supervisors). In addition, supervision patrol instructors monitor visits, take random drug tests, and perform monitoring calls during the SPF. In the data, support and supervision related to SPF in supporting desistance from crime came to the fore in many ways, emphasizing multiple meanings of the interactions and various encounters between those in SPF and the employees.

An appreciative encounter of supervision patrol instructors during the supervision visits was experienced as an unexpected thing that changed the interviewees' attitudes towards the officials. The atmosphere of the meetings was described as relaxed, and small talk was perceived to support coping with everyday life and staying away from intoxicants.

"Supervision patrol instructors are correct and polite, professional and appropriate. They are not at all the kind of people who would provoke, make fun of, or make nasty hints to those performing SPF. (…) You've been in an institution (prison) for ten years and you haven't been treated very well there. Then surprisingly, the supervision patrol instructors, these same authorities, are appropriate towards you. Yes, it has a big meaning." Kalle, male, 58 years

The meetings with supervision patrol instructors and their "*positive cheering attitude*" was perceived as helping a person in SPF to see themselves in a positive light and to build a positive self-image. However, the supervision aspect related to these encounters also contained tensions which the supervision patrol instructors try to neutralize:

"Sometimes I have accidentally left the phone on silent, and the phone warns me that 'the supervision patrol is calling.' There have been a few similar situations before where I thought 'oh hell' in my mind. I once said to them: 'Is there no way you can come at another time. (...) I'm really busy with my studies.' And when they said 'we'll see you later,' I said 'Yes.' Then they came back in the evening. After all, there are a lot of people (at school) running around. You wouldn't necessarily want to advertise that (being in SPF) to others. OK, they offer the opportunity to go to the car and take a breathalyzer test, but ... whether you take a breathalyzer test outside or inside the car, it's exactly the same thing." Hessu, male, 38 years

The excerpt above reveals the dual nature of the meetings with supervision patrol instructors. Although the meeting was perceived as stigmatizing at times, the supervision patrol instructors tried to reduce the stigma caused by visible control and acted flexibly in regard to supervision meetings when the situation required it.

The interviewees also emphasized the importance of the support received from employees and individual discussions. Many of the interviewees had developed a trusting relationship with their own prison employees who understood their overall life situations. One interviewee pointed out that when prison employees believe in someone's change and help them to find their own resources; this motivates them to move towards a crime- and drug-free life.

"I had a strong feeling that something could really come of this. Maybe these people (prison employees) are right that you do have these strengths, and you were wrong."

Interviewer: Did you somehow find a new identity from that?

"Yes. (…) When I had successes, there were good people by my side to support me, so they made me believe in myself. Little by little, I realized that I could cope here too." Hannu, male, 38 years

The above excerpt highlights the central importance of the support and motivation provided by prison employees from the point of view of the construction of a new identity. The interviewees pointed out that some prison employees met them in informal circumstances outside the prison. By stepping aside from their official role, the employees normalized the meetings and tried to reduce the existing power structure. This form of

action appeared to the interviewees as genuine caring. But the interviewees also emphasized that you had to know how to ask for and accept help.

> *"They always found time for me. I've had coffee with the special instructor and other (name of the open prison) prison employees. (Name of the prison social worker) who was there once before was a very nice person too. (...) When you are ready to humble yourself enough to accept help, to ask 'can you help me?,' you will be helped wherever you are. Nowadays the people (referring to the aforementioned employees) are so great. So that's what I strive for myself, that I try to help people whenever I can. I ask someone in a wheelchair, 'can I push you, do you need help?'" Kape, male, 58 years*

The excerpt emphasizes the importance of the "*human to human*" encounter in terms of building the new identity of the person performing SPF and also awakened a desire to help other fellow human beings as well. The interviewees further highlighted that the discussions with the prison's special instructors and peers were also important in supporting their crime- and substance-free lives during their SPF.

> *"Yes, I get support from (name of special instructor). If I needed something more to support me, for example, for my sobriety (...), she just writes on the computer '(my name) needs to get to (name of the substance abuse rehabilitation unit),' and that's it. Yes, I get support from (the open prison). Now I think I have as good a level of support as I can get. I have the NA groups I go to, I get support for my sobriety there. And from (peer related training) I have received support for my desistance from crime." Eemeli, male, 40 years*

All in all, the data revealed the deeper meanings of a humane encounter. In the data, the SPF's supervision meetings appeared as a means of support that helped the person to be free from intoxicants. The appreciative encounter of supervision patrol instructors further seems to reduce resistance towards authorities and helps those serving SPF to see themselves in a positive light. Especially, conversations with the prison's special instructors appear to be central in terms of the construction of a new identity, which were partly complemented by discussions in peer groups.

Challenges in reintegrating into society

Becoming attached to society is a long-term process which does not usually happen during SPF itself. So, more relevant is what happens after the SPF ends. The life situation of people with a history of crime is fundamentally challenging, and while the field of social work is broad, both public social work and numerous NGOs play a central role in helping those who are in SPF or who have been released.

In the SPF's preparation phase, the prison employee assesses the needs for housing and social support from the public social work or NGOs. At the end of the SPF, the importance of social work and support services continues to be emphasized. However, the level of support and control related to social work in supporting a desistance from crime divided the interviewees' opinions.

The importance of financial assistance was emphasized in the interviewee comments, but there were different tensions associated with accessing and applying for it. Notably, the absence of financial assistance raised a risk of drifting back to the path of crime.

> *"Of course, it makes it easier. Like the financial assistance given by the social welfare brings peace of mind that there is nothing to worry about. I have somehow lived according to a realistic budget. Yes, I'm doing well here, and I don't need to think about getting additional funding through criminal activities." Seppo, male, 37 years*

The excerpt brings out the centrality of financial assistance, but also the incompleteness of the construction of the interviewee's non-criminal identity, where criminal means were still seen as an option for obtaining financial support. However, most of interviewees lacked contact with public social work during SPF, and several interviewees had a high threshold for asking the authorities for help in general. Additionally, many of the interviewees also had a negative attitude towards social workers due to their own experiences of child protection interventions.

> *"Well, I've avoided social workers."*
>
> *Interviewer: Was it because of your mother's instructions in your childhood (not to talk to social workers)?*
>
> *"Yeah, it was because of that too. Also, when I was living a criminal life, I thought that people who needed social support should go to the social welfare office. I didn't use those services. I was a criminal, I made money in a completely different way. I was even proud of the fact that I'm not a social bum [laughs]." Pera, male, 59 years*

In the above excerpt, in addition to the stigmatization, belonging to the social work clientele was described as having a negative effect on self-esteem. Furthermore, the interviewees described the attitudes of social workers as cold, and their encounters with social workers as bureaucratic. But some of the interviewees had established good contact with their own social worker, who responded quickly to their requests for help, and helped them to apply for housing or additional financial assistance during SPF, which they were not even aware of. When the social worker changed, network meetings were organized to share information and ensure a continuity of services. But in general, the interviewees defined their social worker encounters as formal, and sometimes there was no opportunity for discussion at all. In these meetings, the topic was mainly support in everyday matters and a clarification of related issues.

> *"(The social worker) calls me sometimes if I'm applying for financial assistance for something. And she asks questions and interrogates me. (…) For example, if I have asked for money for the registration fee and food for an NA or AA event, she asks 'what kind of event is it and how does it support my sobriety.' I always justify it. (…) I don't mind the interrogation. Even now, she has sent a message that she would like to see me when my studies start. (…)*

Yes, she supports me in matters that supports a normal life. And I didn't ask for anything that I didn't need." Veera, female, 39 years

In the above excerpt, the support received from social work and the meetings with social workers supported a desistance from crime and getting by in everyday life, even though the interaction with the social worker itself was partly perceived as an "*interrogation*." In the encounter, elements of support and control were simultaneously present, and the social worker tried to take into account events related to the client's future plans.

Many of the interviewees conducted their SPF in a rehabilitation unit provided by the third sector, where the comprehensive support that was offered came to the fore. There, completing the SPF combined rehabilitation, supported housing, and possible work training or rehabilitative work activities. The weekly schedule also contained social rehabilitation, the maintenance of social family relationships, hobbies, or peer group activities.

"If a person is successfully rehabilitated here at (NGO rehabilitation unit's name), after they complete the SPF, they move on to supported housing (...) Pretty well everyone gets (support for desistance) who has been in this circle (community)." Veera, female, 39 years

In the excerpt, the interviewee describes the importance of gradually progressing and getting comprehensive support, where the community formed by employees and peers supported people's desistance from crime and their return to everyday life. After the SPF had ended, many interviewees were offered a job as peer instructors in an NGO because the normal paid jobs they wanted were not available. But although an attachment to the peer community was essential during the release phase, being satisfied with a peer role did not offer them the same opportunities for attachment to society as returning citizens.

All in all, the material support gained from social work and successful meetings with the social worker appeared to be significant in terms of coping with day-to-day life in SPF and also remaining crime-free. However, public social work was sometimes perceived as bureaucratic, formal meetings perceived as distant, and visits to the social welfare office perceived as stigmatizing, which did not support the construction of a new identity. The SPF conducted in third-sector rehabilitation units and the support offered by rehabilitation employees and peers, in turn, appeared to be key elements in the construction of a new non-criminal identity.

Discussion

This study has examined what meanings sentenced people give to SPF in terms of their desistance from crime. First, this study reveals that SPF's external frames (i.e., activity included in the SPF, weekly schedule, and supervision) offer good conditions for practicing a crime- and drug-free life, and a fair and respectful attitude of supervision patrol instructors towards the sentenced person can also help. Second, the support provided by prison and probation employees appears to be central to the construction of a new identity for people with a history of crime. But according to our results, tertiary desistance seems challenging. The support received from social work is relevant for the

completion of SPF, but it appears to be insufficient for a long-term support for a desistance from crime. In our study, the NGO's role in supporting the integration into society emerged as central during the SPF. However, the opportunities they offered to return to society as active citizens were limited.

According to our findings, SPF is seen as a means of support, where activities based on the sentence plan carried out according to a weekly schedule create a frame for a "normal" everyday life. Work or training appears to be significant, making it possible to carry out everyday activities in freedom while still under EM (e.g., Vanhaelemeesch et al., 2014). Also, SPF-related supervision appears as offering support for a crime- and drug-free life. But from the point of view of forming a new identity, the situation is somewhat more complex. During SPF, the person is without drugs, and receives support from prison and probation employees, which promotes the person's inner change. The supervision of the SPF inherently contains stigmatizing features, but the supervision patrol instructors can help reduce the stigma that is harmful in terms of a desistance from crime. Therefore, the importance of the attitude and interaction skills of prison and probation employees can be especially emphasized (e.g., Järveläinen et al., 2021).

Previous studies have described the interaction between released people and employees who support desistance in different ways (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Järveläinen et al., 2021; McCulloch, 2005; Shapland et al., 2012). The social support, mentoring, and empowerment provided by the employee are central in motivating individuals to desist from crime (Fox, 2022; Kirkwood, 2023; Shapland et al., 2012). Furthermore, Andvig et al. (2021) have emphasized the importance of a respectful and equal encounter. According to Kirkwood (2023), employee assistance in practical matters and mentoring can act as a "hook for change," which together with internal motivation, supports a person's desistance from crime (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). On the other hand, while the tense relationship between supervision and support has been highlighted in this study, with a humane encounter, the employee can reduce tension and the resistance against them as figures of authority (e.g., Salovaara, 2020). These different aspects of social interaction also came to the fore in this study, and especially, the social support offered by prison employees and individual discussions supporting desistance appear to be central in terms of building a person's new identity.

The nature of SPF activity is also relevant from the point of view of desistance. Work and study provide the basis for returning to society (Durnescu et al., 2013; Farrall, 2002, 2014), and in this sense, they can also support desistance. Conducting SPF in a rehabilitation unit that offers versatile support, and where supported housing, rehabilitation, work activities, and community support are in the same place, in turn enables the building of social capital (e.g., Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Fox's (2022) description of external and internal drivers of desistance as interacting elements best supports a person's desistance from crime. Similarly, in this study, various rehabilitative elements and the comprehensive support received from the employees of the rehabilitative unit appear to be relevant in terms of a desistance from crime.

The key challenge is to identify how the process of desistance continues after SPF has finished. Nugent and Schinkel (2016) point out that in terms of identity formation and finding one's place in society, work appears to be important. Of course, employment in the

free labor market can be considered as the primary option here, either directly or with the help of various labor policy support measures. From the point of view of tertiary desistance, a risk to societal integration is the possible maintenance of an ex-criminal identity through an attachment to the rehabilitative community, especially if employed in peer support positions. In this study, only a few of the interviewees were in paid work during the SPF. Thus, job opportunities appear to be insufficient in terms of creating a new identity and returning to society.

According to our findings, social work in its current form cannot meet this challenge of tertiary desistance. Social welfare is able to offer material support for a crime-free everyday life (e.g., Croft et al., 2004; Järveläinen et al., 2021; Raitakari and Berger, 2016), but there would seem to be tensions in the interactions with social workers and interruptions in accessing their services (Järveläinen et al., 2021). The construction of service networks that support integration into society is therefore a challenge that concerns both prison sentence planning, rehabilitation units, and social work (Järveläinen et al., 2021; Raitakari and Berger, 2016; Wikoff et al., 2012).

According to Harrikari and Westerholm (2015), Finnish probation work has experienced significant changes related to structures, legislation, methods, ethos, and the focus of work during the last decades, where an approach that supports the individual and emphasizes the work orientation of social welfare has been moved to an approach that reduces individual recidivism and seeks to protect society through open sanctions. Shifting the focus to the prevention of recidivism and community sanctions obviously supports the desistance of a person with a history of crime; however, the challenge is the lack of client-centered social work. But regardless of these considerations, the importance of SPF in supporting desistance seems considerable in light of our results.

Limitations

The interviewees selected for this study were based on their SPF experience, and only 26 people participated in the study. Due to the limitations of the research sample and the small number of participants, the generalizability of results should therefore be treated with caution. Particularly, the average age of the interviewees was quite high (42 years), they were quite educated, and most of them ($n = 19$) had participated in various substance abuse rehabilitation programs and some ($n = 6$) had completed expert-by-experience training, which may have contributed to their positive self-narrative emphasizing a change of identity and desistance.

Conclusions

The SPF featured in the Finnish penal system is a form of gradual release that is able to create a framework for a crime-free life. The starting point of the desistance from crime is the person's own desire. But in the formation of a new identity, the support of prison and probation employees' and the importance of social interaction also played a central role. The end of the SPF appears to be a critical phase in terms of desistance, when the work started during the SPF and other forms of support also tended to end. The support received

from public social work after release also appears to be insufficient in terms of the person's attachment to society, and while the role of NGOs in supporting integration into society proved to be essential during the SPF, the return opportunities it offered were also limited. It is therefore necessary to evaluate how a sufficient continuity of services and employment opportunities is built through gradual release, which are central elements in preventing people's marginalization and promoting their return to society.

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