



# THEY ALL COME OUT

MAPPING THE DESISTANCE  
JOURNEYS OF 150 PRISON-  
LEAVERS OVER 18 MONTHS

*HELEN KOSC*

*Dec 2 2025*

# Presentation Outline

- Overview of the Project
- Timeline of Resettlement
- ‘Successful’ Resettlement
- Questions...



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Why are almost **half** of prison-leavers in the United Kingdom, returning to prison – through recall or reoffending – within the **first year of release** ?



Why are **1 in 3** prison-leavers returning within the **first month** of release ?



## The Western European Nations Imprisoning the Most People

Countries with the highest number of prisoners per 100,000 of the population

England & Wales   
Scotland   
Portugal   
Spain 

# Staff shortages an issue amid 'deeply worrying' prison deaths in England

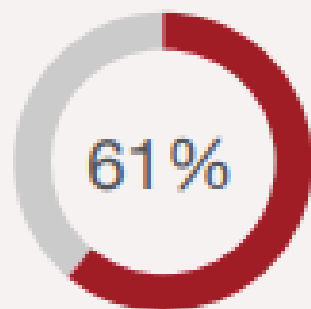
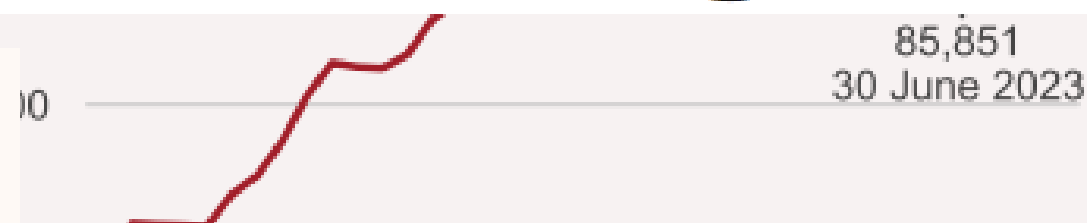
The prison population has risen by 80% in the last 30 years — and it is currently projected to rise by a further 7,400 people by 2024.<sup>1</sup>

**The Observer** Prisons and probation

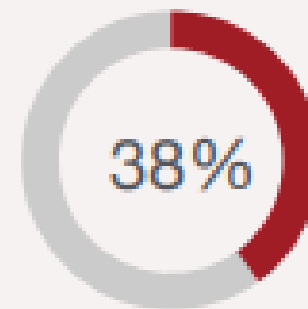
The Observer view: Britain's brutal and overcrowded prisons pose a risk to us all

Ob

Source



The majority had committed a non-violent offence



Nearly two in five were sentenced to serve six months or less



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In 2022, in an effort to reduce reoffending and improve resettlement, the Ministry of Justice and Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner funded a 2-year pilot programme offering through-the-gate support to prison-leavers.

Team of 10 frontline workers offering support to prison-leavers from one local, men's CAT-B prison.

A large, dark blue curved arrow pointing from the first text block to the second.

The RESTART workers offered 'through-the-gate' support... supporting men inside the prison, on the day of release, and out in the community...

**In May 2022, I joined the team of support workers to observe, speak with and shadow the resettlement journeys of 150 prison-leavers over 18 months.**

# 18 MONTHS

## Before Release

- Meet with men on the Wings / in custody
- Make a 'game-plan' for their release
- Outline short-term and long-term goals
- Have discussions about the kind of support they require from RESTART to achieve these goals



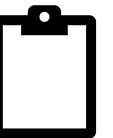
## During Release

- Arrange to pick-up men 'at the gate'
- Myself and RESTART worker then drive the man to his Probation Meeting
- Often spend 6 hours on the day of release...
- -Visiting Bank, registering with a GP, setting up phone w SIM card, visiting the Job Centre to open up UC Claim, pick up Prescription from Pharmacy, Present as homeless to the Council...etc.



## After Release

- Follow-up with the men weekly / bi-weekly
- Attend any future appointments with the RESTART worker
- Revisit short-term and long-term goals they outlined in prison





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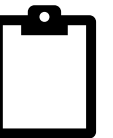
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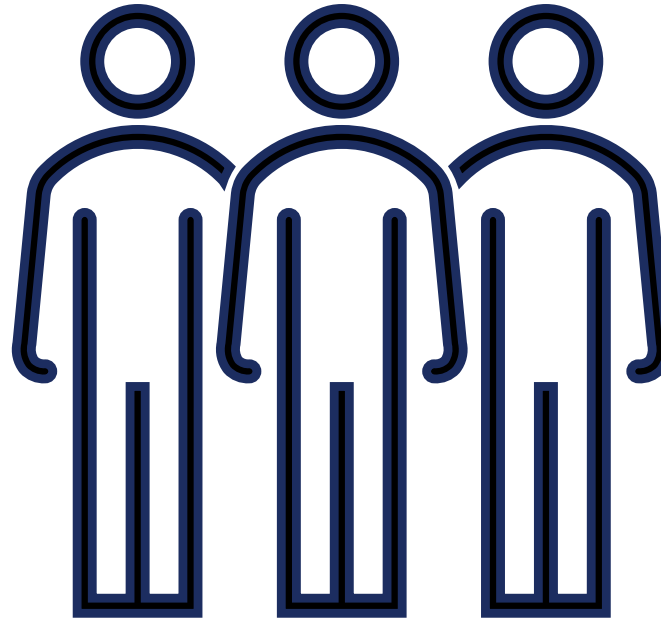


18 months

150 prison-leavers

Unstructured, sequential  
interviews before, during and  
after release

‘go-along’  
ethnography



Long-term  
Participant Observation

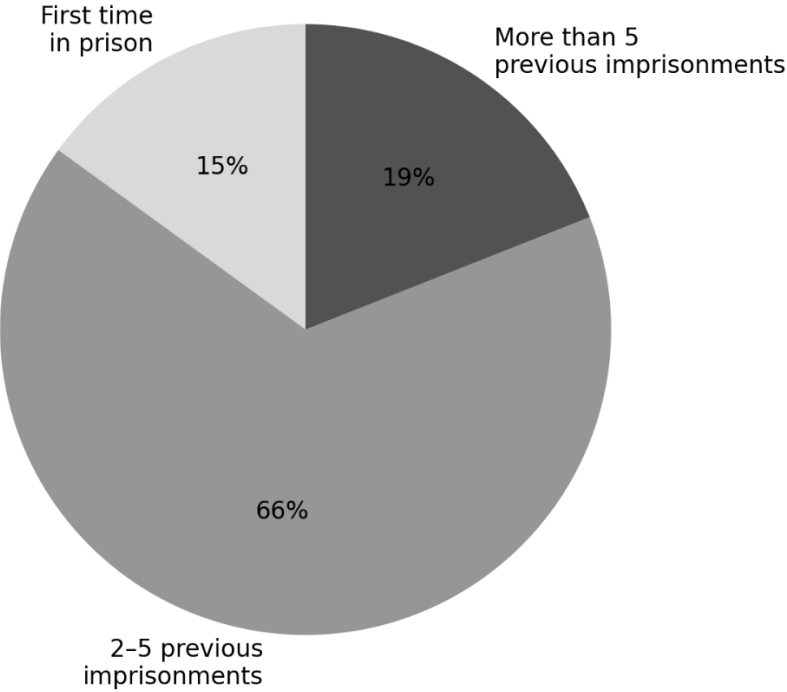
Researcher embedded in the  
**ordinary activities of every day**

deep & rich micro-level data



# The Cohort

Imprisonment History of the Participant Cohort



Characteristic	RESTART Sample (%)	UK Prison Population (%)	UK Prison Population Source
Excluded from school	68 %	~63 %	Williams, Papadopoulou, & Booth, 2012
Grew up in care	24 %	~24 %	Prison Reform Trust, 2021
Employed at arrest	13 %	~32 %	Hopkins, 2021
Qualifications above A-level	8 %	No available data	_____
DSM-5 mental disorder (any)	51 %	>90 %	NICE, 2014
Multiple mental health difficulties	76 %	76 % (dual diagnosis)	NICE, 2024
History of homelessness	41 %	~15 %	Ministry of Justice, 2012
Homeless at arrest	24 %	~13 %	Nacro, 2024
Illicit drug use history	78 %	10–48 % (males)	NICE, 2014
Substance dependence	40 %	30–60 %	NICE, 2014
Supportive friends/family	39 %	No available data	_____
Intentionally sought imprisonment	30 %	No available data	_____

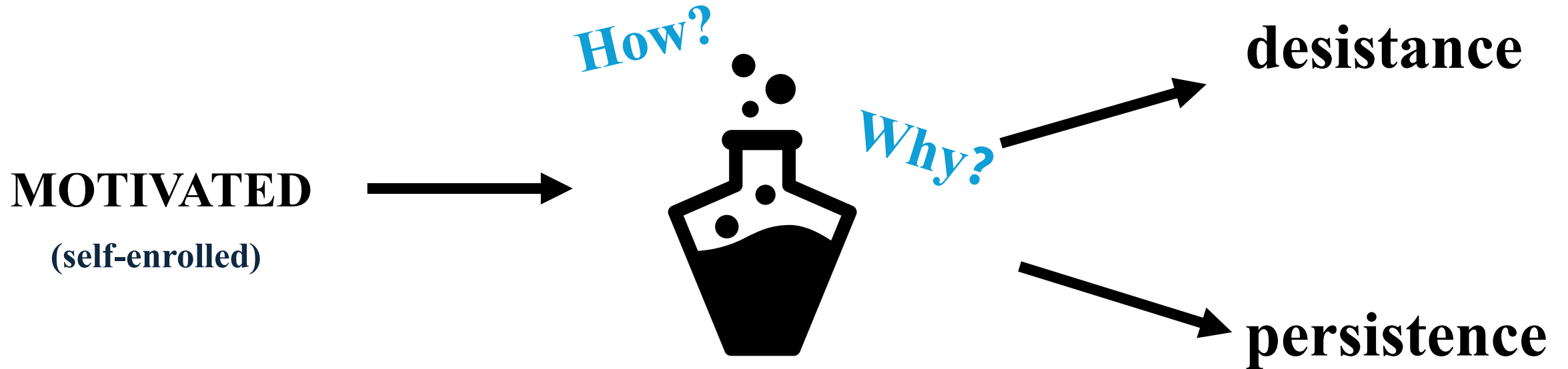
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# 5 Stages of Resettlement



**Pre-Release**



**First Month**



**18 Months**

**Day of Release**



**Long Run  
(Month 12-17)**



## What was ready (and what wasn't)

- Men were being released unhoused
- Men didn't know conditions of parole
- Men wouldn't know their Probation Office or Officer
- For some men on remand, even the release date was an unknown

The Plan



The Action



The Unknowns



# Pre-Release

Hope, Caution, Short horizons

“Out of Time”



*“I’m out in two days! And  
I don’t know where I’m  
going to be staying?”*

“Left Waiting”

*“With nowhere to go and no money, I am basically set up to fail, I know I have to take some responsibility, but I just can’t seem to get out of this cycle.”*



### **The ‘To-Do’ List:**

- Probation Visit
- Council Housing
- Register at the GP
- Attend Jobcentre
- Activate Bank account
- Collect ID
- Collect any prescriptions
- Phone Social Services

**Men felt “Outpaced”**

# **Day of Release**

**Fast-paced, unforgiving tempo, supervision**

**“A race against time”**

*“They’ve set me up to fail”*



**“Can’t keep up”**



- Unfortunately, **we can't offer a home to everyone who applies**
- There are currently **2780 people waiting on the housing register but only 490 properties become vacant each year**
- Applicants with **low need or who require a one bed or family sized property can expect to wait around 10-20 years**

Historically, studies have shown that housing prison leavers could significantly reduce reoffending by at least 20% (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002)...

79% of prison leavers who reported being homeless on release were reconvicted in the first year of release. Compared to 48% of those who were housed upon release.

86.6% of my sample were released homeless

## ***Leaving Prison amidst a National Housing Crisis***

In Autumn 2022, 3,069 individuals were recorded sleeping on the streets in England (HDLUHC, 2023), with local figures even starker

# **First Month**

## **Fragile Beginnings, Scarcity, Precarious Housing**

*“The place they put me in was full of drugs, you can't even breath in there, its full of drugs. They say ‘oh you need a roof over your head and that's it, that's all you need’. They think that if you have a bed, that's all you need. That's completely wrong, you know, that's what makes people want to go on the street.”*



*“You can't put me in a place like that and say ‘You have to focus’. Focus on what? Where? On the ceiling? On the floor? Where should I focus? They think just because you're in a place you should focus. Before you can focus, the surroundings need to be right. Its like having a car with only 3 tires. They say ‘drive safe’, but what about the tires? They say ‘forget about the tires, just drive and be careful. Drive. It's a straight road.’ But it doesn't work like that, you need to have the tires first.”*

***Stability brings new risks:*** old acquaintances re-emerged precisely because men had begun to secure income and housing. What had once felt like *progress* began to feel like exposure.

***Drift & ‘Empty’ Time***



**Supervision disappears**

***The Design Labour of Holding Time***

# Long-Run

**Converting ‘Open’ Time into ‘Owned’ Time**

**Finding steady anchors, new risks emerge**

***Everything but the Job***

“It’s not even about the money. It’s about feeling like I’m going somewhere. Like I’m building something. I’ve been doing everything right and it’s like... nothing’s happening.”





### **Desistance as ‘Dodging’**

“I dodged it. I dodged it. And I shouldn’t have to. I didn’t want to have to be on the edge like that. I shouldn’t *have* to be on the edge like that. I just barely escaped doing something bad. If it weren’t for my family, I’d be back inside already.”

**Desistance by ‘Default’**

# **18 Months**

**Two conflicting truths**

***Desistance as ‘Snapping’***



**Desisting *WHILST* Persisting**



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Rethinking ‘Success’

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Rethinking ‘Success’

*Was RESTART successful? Were some men successful? Which men 'succeeded'? And how?*

*Well...How are we measuring 'success' anyways?*



*What ‘Counts’ as Success...*

*...Depends on WHO is asking...*

## Misalignment between:

Probation

*VS*

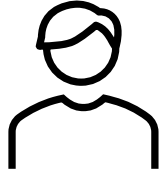
Researcher

*VS*

the men  
themselves

# Reoffending as ‘Survival’ ...

## Internal Negotiation



**Ant**

*My mom would worry so much about me... One day I remember her crying to me and saying: ‘if you don’t go back inside to die out here.’*

**‘Choice’**

*I think she was exaggerating. But one night as I sat there, staring at my belongings gone, woozy from lack of food, for the first time I thought to myself: ‘I will be better in there. Mom’s right.’*

**AGENCY**

*At least in jail I don’t have to have a shower. I can have a hot meal. I can’t be assaulted.*

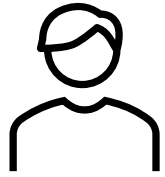
**Temporary**

**Persistence**

*So that night I did myself arrested.*

# Desistance as ‘Dodging’...

Does this ‘count’?



**Andrew**

*If it weren't for [redacted] I would've been back  
close, to be perfectly  
honest.*

**Not the kind of  
‘desistence’  
he’d imagined**

*[redacted] and don't trust people;  
[redacted] ready for work; I'm not happy with where  
I'm living; I feel like I'm just barely getting by.*

*If you had asked me when I first got released, I'd  
never have thought I'd get so close to the edge.*

*“I dodged it. I dodged it.  
But I shouldn't have to  
be dodging it.”*

**Can dodging =  
successful  
desistence?**



# Why Men's Own Perceptions Matter...

- “Feeling like a fraud” predicted drift, and drift often lead to recall or reoffending
- When men's own self-perceptions misalign with others' evaluations, this poses problems for desistance
- Men need alignment to feel legitimacy, and to feel faith that change was possible.
- Misalignments in evaluation strangled men's belief in themselves and faith that change was possible.
- For probation, progress was assessed through compliance within compressed cycles: attending appointments, avoiding breaches, sustaining housing or employment for fixed durations. For researchers, desistance could be recognised in slower, more fragile footholds: a man resisting relapse, keeping volatile relationships intact, or choosing disengagement from negative peers. For the men, however, success was often defined in still more intimate and uneven ways — measured by endurance, by the avoidance of collapse, or by simply ‘keeping going.’

- *“If people keep treating me like I'm not enough, maybe I'm not. Maybe prison is exactly where I should be.”*

**This divergence raises one final important Q:**  
**What counts as success and to whom? Who should be judging, measuring and evaluating successful desistance?**  
**And what, or perhaps *who*, are we measuring for?**



**Thank you for listening.**

**Any Questions?**

**Helen Kosc**  
**University of Oxford, DPhil in Sociology**  
M: +44 7551354582  
E: [helen.kosc@sociology.ox.ac.uk](mailto:helen.kosc@sociology.ox.ac.uk)