

Mapping desistance research: A systematic quantitative literature review from 2011 to 2020

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Abstract

In the past decade, desistance research has attracted immense research attention, which has necessitated the clarification of the overall picture of desistance research in terms of methodology, definition, and theory. Using the systematic quantitative literature review method, we seek to provide an overview of English-written peer-reviewed journal articles on desistance from 2011 to 2020. Analysis of 196 studies reveals that despite an almost equal quantitative–qualitative divide in desistance research, there is skewness in terms of research location, sample size, and usage of operationalisation and theory. Based on these findings, we suggest the future direction of desistance research.

Keywords: Desistance; systematic quantitative literature review; quantitative-qualitative divide; geographical skewness; tertiary desistance

Introduction

Every discipline has a unique research trend, and in criminology, this trend has focused on desistance, at least over the last decade (Maier et al., 2022). Indeed, Maruna (2017)

has observed a growing body of research on desistance since the 2000s. The then-editors of the *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*, Mazerolle and McGee (2019:1) reported that when they called for studies for the special issues of desistance, they received a ‘sheer volume of responses’. Desistance research has attracted considerable attention from criminologists worldwide.

The increasing volume of literature on desistance has enhanced the knowledge of how and why offenders find a way out of their criminal activities; however, it has also led to variability in desistance research, causing problems in grasping a comprehensive picture of the desistance literature. This variability in desistance research is partly attributed to differing operationalisations of desistance. Rocque (2017) argues that defining desistance determines the methodology and interpretation of desistance research. In this regard, there is a global consensus that desistance is a gradual and dynamic process that involves lapses and relapses of offending until complete cessation (Bottoms and Shapland, 2019; van Ginneken and Hart, 2017). Reflecting on this characteristic, Maruna et al. (2004:19) proposed two distinct phases of desistance: primary and secondary. The former refers to ‘any lull or crime-free gap in the course of a criminal career’, whereas the latter refers to ‘the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the assumption of the role or identity of a “changed person”’. To transcend the personal aspects of desistance and reflect on its social and political aspects, McNeill (2015:201) later offered an additional phase of desistance: tertiary desistance, which involves ‘not just ... shifts in behaviour or identity but ... shifts in one’s sense of belonging to a (moral and political) community’. Such multi-dimensionality of the desistance process confuses the term ‘desistance’.

The existing desistance research also varies in its use of theories. Similar to the

variability of conceptualisation and operationalisation, the variation in theories of desistance research is attributed to differentiated explanations of how ex-offenders are on the path to desistance. Graham and McNeill (2017) argued that existing desistance theories can be classified into four categories. The first is ontogenetic theories, which suggest that most people, even those with prolific criminal careers, desist as part of the ageing and maturation processes (e.g., Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). The second is sociogenetic theories, which emphasise the relationship between desistance as a human developmental process and associated shifts in social roles and social bonds. An example is the age-graded theory of informal social control put forward by Sampson and Laub (1993), who postulated that the majority of offenders cease offending in reaction to turning points, such as marriage and employment, which acts as catalysts for maintaining enduring behavioural transformations. The third category includes identity theories, which focus on the subjective dimensions associated with ageing, human development, and changing social bonds. The importance of identity transformation in the desistance process is highlighted by Maruna (2001) who found that whereas individuals who successfully achieved desistance saw themselves as lifelong rebellious figures, those who persisted in criminal activities characterized their lives in considerably deterministic, almost mechanistic, language. The last is situational theories, which emphasise how diverse elements within our social surroundings and our routine activities exert influence on the desistance process (e.g., Bottoms, 2014). Due to the lack of a one-size-fits-all theory, different theoretical explanations have been adapted to account for the different desistance processes of various offenders and offences.

This variability in the fundamental understanding of the desistance process has resulted in diverse desistance research. To date, however, no research offers compre-

hensive knowledge about our current position in desistance research. The existing reviews have contributed to advancing our knowledge about desistance research; however, since they tend to focus solely on one aspect of desistance (e.g., definition, type of offence) (e.g., Leclair et al., 2022), they do not provide an overall picture of where we are at in desistance research. Additionally, some existing reviews are not systematic but narrative (e.g., Van Roeyen et al., 2017), raising concerns about comprehensibility and objectivity. Given the tremendous increase in desistance research over the last decade, the absence of a comprehensive examination of variabilities is detrimental to understanding the desistance process. Therefore, it is necessary to provide an overall picture of desistance research to ascertain its trends, that is, what is being examined and how. Using the systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) method for desistance literature from 2011 to 2020, we sought to map the existing variabilities in desistance research in terms of methodologies, definitions, and theories. More specifically, we extend existing reviews of desistance by examining the variabilities in desistance research and offering an overview of desistance research to propose future research agendas.

Specifically, in this descriptive study, we aimed to answer the following questions: (1) What various types of methodologies have been utilized within desistance research (and most common?), (2) What are the various and most common ways desistance has been operationalized?, (3) What are the various and most common theories identified within desistance research? As Hart et al. (2022) note, an SQLR is an appropriate tool for investigating methodological trends because it allows for facilitates a thorough and reproducible examination of publications centered around a particular research issue. By addressing these research questions, we intend to extend the existing reviews on desistance and identify future research agendas.

Methods

The systematic quantitative literature review

To accomplish our research agenda of sketching an overall picture of trends in desistance studies as a descriptive study, we decided to use a systematic review because it allowed us to gather pertinent evidence adhering to predefined eligibility criteria to address a particular research question and to diminish bias (Chandler et al., 2022). Among the various methodologies of systematic review, we employed the SQLR method, which focuses not on the outcomes of the selected studies but on the content to facilitate a numerical understanding of the characteristics of the chosen studies. We argue that the SQLR is the most appropriate method for our research for three reasons: First, as mentioned above, under the umbrella heading of systematic reviews, the SQLR can minimise biases compared to narrative reviews, which seems to be the dominant approach in existing reviews. Second, as the SQLR targets not only quantitative but also qualitative research, unlike the traditional type of systematic review, its use better serves our purpose of providing an overview of desistance research.¹ Indeed, using the SQLR, Suzuki et al. (2018) offered an overall picture of the use of criminology theories in Asia. Third, and most importantly, the ultimate goal of the SQLR is to generate insights into both our existing knowledge and areas where knowledge is lacking, achieved by discerning research patterns and deficiencies (Pickering et al., 2015). Similar to Hart et al.'s (2022) research on fear of crime, using this method contributes to highlighting the gaps in desistance research. Drawing on the SQLR, we aim to provide possible directions for future research on desistance.

Eligibility criteria

Desistance studies were selected based on the following criteria. We defined desistance

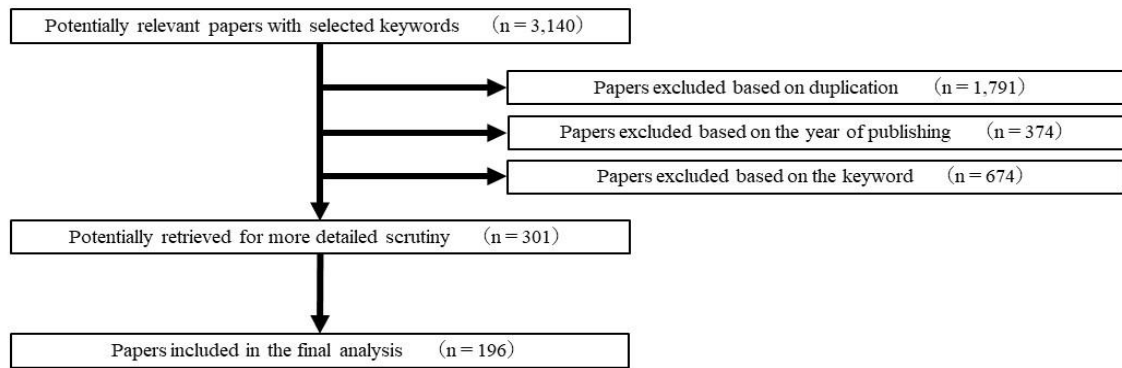
research as studies that examined a transformation in offending behaviours and subjective accounts. In this sense, we distinguished desistance research from rehabilitation studies that examined the effectiveness of interventions and programmes to prevent and reduce the potential of reoffending (c.f., Bottoms and Shapland, 2019; Maruna, 2017). To obtain the latest information, we focused on desistance research published between 2011 and 2020. We targeted peer-reviewed journal articles and excluded book chapters, grey literature, and dissertations. We concur with Leclair et al. (2022) who assert that the peer-reviewed process stands as a valid indicator of knowledge within the social sciences discipline compared to conference presentations, books, and dissertations. In fact, it has recently become common for some findings of a dissertation to be first published as peer-reviewed journal articles before being included in a book (e.g., Weaver, 2015). Finally, we limited our search to studies in English because it is arguably the common language of criminology (Suzuki et al., 2018).

Search strategy and screening process

We used the following five databases: Criminal Justice Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, ProQuest, PsychINFO, and Scopus. As a search string, we combined two sets of truncated terms: *desist** AND (*crime** OR *delinquen** OR *offen**). We conducted a database search from June to August 2021.

Figure 1 illustrates the screening process. Our search generated 3,140 peer-reviewed journal articles on desistance. Thereafter, we excluded studies based on (1) duplications, (2) publication years, and (3) titles, abstracts, and keywords ($n = 301$). This was followed by more detailed scrutiny by reading the entire text. In total, 196 desistance studies were identified.²

Figure 1. Screening process



Results

Based on our search and screening, we created a database of the identified studies in terms of (1) publication year, (2) research design, (3) location of research, (4) sample size, (5) definition of desistance, and (6) type of theory.³ Table 1 summarises the databases. As expected, the number of peer-reviewed journal articles on desistance increased over the selected decade. In particular, desistance research noticeably increased in the last five years of the decade. However, as shown in Table 1, this upsurge has caused variability in desistance research. In the following section, we discuss these variabilities in light of methodologies, definitions, and theories.

Table 1. Summary of research details (N=196)

Category	Frequency (%)
(1)Publication yea	
former 5 years (2011-2015)	33.2 (n = 65)
latter 5 years (2016-2020)	66.8 (n = 131)
(2)Research design ^{*1}	
Quantitative	51.0 (n = 100)
Qualitative	46.4 (n = 91)
Mixed method	2.6 (n = 5)
(3)Location of research	
Europe	41.9 (n = 90)
UK	19.1 (n = 41)
Northern Americæ	51.6 (n = 111)
US	48.4 (n = 104)
Southern Americæ	0.5 (n = 1)
Asia	2.8 (n = 6)
Oceania	2.8 (n = 6)
(4)Sample size ^{*2}	
n ≤ 100	51.5 (n = 101)
n ≤ 50	44.9 (n = 88)
50 < n	6.6 (n = 13)
100 < n	43.4 (n = 85)
n ≤ 1000	16.3 (n = 32)
1000 < n	27.0 (n = 53)
n ≤ 10000	25.0 (n = 49)
n ≤ 5000	21.4 (n = 42)
5000 < n	3.6 (n = 7)
10000 < n	2.0 (n = 4)
unidentified ^{*2}	5.1 (n = 10)
(5)Operationalisation of desistance ^{*4}	
Primary desistance	79.6 (n = 156)
Secondary desistance	41.3 (n = 81)
Tertiary desistance	4.6 (n = 9)
(6)Type of theory ^{*5}	
Ontogenetic theory	12.8 (n = 25)
Sociogenetic theory	49.5 (n = 97)
Identity theory	47.4 (n = 93)
Situational theory	11.7 (n = 23)

*1: This category relies on Creswell (2014).

*2 The subcategories were designed to divide the eligible studies roughly in half.

*3: This category applies to studies that do not provide details even though the sample size is mentioned, such as studies conducted multiple times.

*4 This category relies on Maruna et al. (2004) and McNeill (2015).

Methodological variability

Based on a study by Creswell (2014), we divided the identified studies into three research designs: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. The results showed that they were almost equally categorised as either quantitative (51.0%) or qualitative (46.4%). There were only a handful of mixed-method studies (2.6%).

The research locations in the samples were divided equally. The majority of the identified desistance research was conducted in Europe (41.9%), especially in the

United Kingdom (UK) (19.1%) and North America (51.6%), predominately in the United States (US) (48.4%). Only a few studies were conducted in South America (0.5%), Asia (2.8%), and Oceania (2.8%).

The sample size in the identified studies was equally divided into those with a sample size of less than or equal to 100 (51.5%) and those with a sample size of more than 100 (43.4%). Yet, it is noteworthy that among the studies with a sample size of less than or equal to 100 ($n = 101$), 88 studies (44.9%) had a sample size of less than or equal to 50. Regarding studies with larger sample sizes, more than a quarter of the total sample sizes were greater than 1,000 and a few, which were mostly conducted in the US, were greater than 10,000.

Operational variability

Based on Maruna et al.'s (2004) definitions of primary and secondary desistance, as well as McNeill's (2015) definition of tertiary desistance, we examined the operationalisation of desistance in the identified studies. In our sample, primary desistance was the most frequently used, accounting for 79.6%, followed by secondary desistance (41.3%) and tertiary desistance (4.6%). It can be noted that the sum of the frequencies of each operationalisation exceeded the total sample size of 196 in our SQLR because a few of the identified studies used more than one definition.

Table 2 shows a more detailed breakdown of the use of each desistance operationalisation in the identified studies. A total of 38 studies (19.4%) explored the processes and outcomes of primary and secondary desistance. Tertiary desistance was not investigated alone; it was examined along with primary desistance ($n = 5$, 2.6%), secondary desistance ($n = 1$, 0.5%), or both ($n = 3$, 1.5%).

Table 2. The breakdown of the reference to each desistance operationalisation in the identified research (N=196)

Primary desistance only	110	56.1%
Secondary desistance only	39	19.9%
Tertiary desistance only	0	0.0%
Primary desistance + Secondary desistance	38	19.4%
Primary desistance + Tertiary desistance	5	2.6%
Secondary desistance + Tertiary desistance	1	0.5%
Primary desistance + Secondary desistance + Tertiary desistance	3	1.5%
Total	196	100.0%

Theoretical variability

Following the classification of desistance theories by Graham and McNeill (2017), we explored the theories used in the identified studies. Most studies relied on either socio-genetic theories (49.5%) or identity theories (47.4%). Ontogenetic (12.8%) and situational (11.7 %) theories were infrequently used.

As with the definitions, the use of desistance theories was duplicated in the identified studies. Therefore, we explored the overlap between desistance theories in the identified studies (see Table 3). In 27 studies, no theory was identifiable (13.8%), 110 studies used only one theory (56.1%), 49 articles used two theories (25.0%), 10 studies used three theories (5.1 %), and none used all four theories together.

Table 3. Number of references to desistance theories (N=196)

Number of the use of desistance theories	Total
0	27 (13.8%)
none	27 (13.8%)
1	110 (56.1%)
ontogenetic theory	6 (3.1%)
sociogenetic theory	45 (23.0%)
identity theory	46 (23.5%)
situational theory	13 (6.6%)
2	49 (25.0%)
ontogenetic theory+sociogenetic theory	9 (4.6%)
ontogenetic theory+identity theory	2 (1.0%)
ontogenetic theory+situational theory	0 (0.0%)
sociogenetic theory+identity theory	30 (15.3%)
sociogenetic theory+situational theory	3 (1.5%)
identity theory+situational theory	5 (2.6%)
3	10 (5.1%)
except situational theory	8 (4.1%)
except identity theory	0 (0.0%)
except sociogenetic theory	0 (0.0%)
except ontogenetic theory	2 (1.0%)
4	0 (0.0%)
All	0 (0.0%)

Discussion

Overall, our results of the variability in desistance research can be summarized as follows: (1) desistance research was continuously on the rise in the past decade; (2) the research designs were almost evenly split between quantitative and qualitative research; (3) a significant majority of desistance research was conducted either in the UK or the US; (4) small-scale research on desistance was most common; (5) the follow-up period for desistance research was generally less than five years (6) primary desistance was the most commonly employed definition in desistance research; and (7) sociogenetic and

identity theories were most examined in desistance research. Having highlighted noteworthy characteristics of desistance research, we will now discuss how the research can be advanced.

Quantitative–qualitative divide in desistance research

The first distinguishable characteristic of desistance research is its use of a qualitative approach. Approximately half of the desistance research in our sample used qualitative approaches. Although our research was not limited to leading journals, this finding may be in stark contrast to the findings of Copes et al. (2020), who conducted a content analysis of qualitative research published in top criminology and criminal justice journals between 2010 and 2019 and found that only 11.3% of the studies in these journals employed a qualitative approach.

This equal quantitative–qualitative divide in desistance research may be promising, not just because qualitative criminologists frequently lament the difficulty of publishing their research (Jacques, 2014), but also because methodologically, both quantitative and qualitative research play important roles in advancing desistance research. In studies that examine reoffending, both approaches are often conceptualised as opposing methodological paradigms when, in fact, they are complementary (Maruna and Mann, 2019). According to the ‘what works’ tradition, quantitative research on desistance facilitates the identification of factors associated with the desistance process (e.g., Ha et al., 2019). In contrast, with the ‘how it works’ question in mind, qualitative research on desistance explores the subjective accounts and experiences of ex-offenders on a path to desistance (e.g., Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam, 2022). As both quantitative and qualitative research have accumulated almost equally to advance insights into desistance, we

may have experienced rapid growth in knowledge within desistance research. Therefore, by maintaining this equal methodological distribution, the next step in desistance research would be to explore the variability in the desistance process contingent on the type of offender and offences. We need to contextualise the desistance process to build theories tailored to these variabilities. Establishing such knowledge would lead to the development of a variety of support practices for desistance.

The remaining question is why, unlike other areas of criminology, has there been a fair amount of qualitative research on desistance. As already discussed, this may be related to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of desistance research (Rocque, 2017). Our research shows that the qualitative approach is used more frequently with secondary desistance and identity theories of desistance. While 55 qualitative studies used secondary desistance (28.0%), 56 employed identity theory (28.5%). Such a definition and theory may require a qualitative approach because desistance scholars need to explore ‘thoughts, emotions, identity traits, and feelings that change as social circumstances do’ (Cooley and Sample, 2018: 498).

Geographical skewness in desistance research

The second distinct feature of desistance research is its geographical disparity. Our results show that most desistance research originated in Western countries, accounting for 93.5% of the sample. In particular, the United States and the United Kingdom together published approximately 70% of the desistance research in our sample. This may be partly due to the luxury of data availability and the conducive environment for conducting desistance research in these countries.⁴ Conducting empirical studies in other countries is difficult because of limited access to criminological data (e.g., Lee and Laidler, 2013) and theoretical and political analyses are the dominant approaches (c.f., Kazemian, 2020).

In our view, this geographical disparity in desistance research has two repercussions. The first is the dominance of knowledge production in Western societies. This dominance may be problematic because the knowledge produced in this context is taken for granted without scrutiny in other cultural contexts (Aliverti et al., 2021), even though these countries do not necessarily represent the remaining regions (Henrich et al., 2010). This is not only the case in desistance research and criminology, but also in social sciences in general. For example, the majority of current psychological knowledge emanates from Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). To overcome this lack of representation, psychologists have long engaged in the movement of ‘decolonising’ knowledge (see Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021). This movement has recently emerged in criminology, as observed in *Southern Criminology* (Carrington et al., 2016) and *Asian Criminology* (Liu, 2016), both of which seek to move beyond Euro-American views of crime (Suzuki and Pai, 2019). This attempt is also necessary for desistance research because there are only a few comparative studies on desistance, but they have consistently demonstrated that the desistance process differs between countries (Barry, 2017), cultures (Segev, 2020), races/ethnicities (Calverley, 2013), and religions (Linge, 2021). Comparative research is crucial because most current research focuses on middle-aged white men, ignoring other segments of the offender population (c.f., Robertson and Wainwright, 2020; Rodermond et al., 2016; Villeneuve et al., 2019). Based on our findings of geographical disparity in desistance research, we invited desistance scholars to perform comparative research to unravel the complexity of desistance. We believe that conducting such studies will lead to enhanced support and greater diversity of support for desistance.

The second ripple effect of geographical disparity is that most desistance research has been conducted in two countries, the US and the UK, which are categorised as neo-liberal nations (Cavadino and Dignan, 2006). This may result in a prevalent focus on personal agency in the desistance process (e.g., Brezina, 2020), which has been previously highlighted. Kazemian (2020) observed concerns in the desistance literature related to an overemphasis on personal agency. These concerns stem from the fact that this over-emphasis not only neglects inequalities and injustices that ex-offenders struggle to overcome in their desistance process, but also responsabilises them for their failures to desist instead of helping them equip themselves with social, human, economic, and cultural capital to find a path to desistance (Hart, 2017). Although desistance is generally a zig-zag process involving intermittent offending (van Koppen et al., 2020), under the responsibilities discourse, offenders are required to be held accountable for their lapses and relapses in offending (Kazemian, 2020). Given the numerous blockages, barriers, and challenges facing offenders in their desistance process (Droppelmann, 2022), we concur with Healy (2019) who argued that the onus of change does not rest exclusively upon the individual endeavouring to achieve desistance because society, too, must play a role by furnishing opportunities that empower former offenders to attain a genuine sense of inclusion within society and engage fully in its activities. This is discussed in detail below.

Moving beyond behavioural and identity transformation in desistance research

Partly consistent with Leclair et al. (2022), our findings suggest that criminologists tend to utilise either primary or secondary desistance to operationalise it in their research.

This tendency indicates the scarcity of references to tertiary desistance in the literature.

The dearth of tertiary desistance literature is partly because it is new (McNeill, 2015)

relative to primary and secondary desistance (Maruna et al., 2004). However, to a certain extent, the lack of tertiary desistance literature can also be attributed to the difficulty of measuring it because there is no clear guidance for operationalisation.

Despite this methodological limitation, we consider tertiary desistance to be a significant phase of desistance. What distinguishes tertiary desistance from other phases is that it covers not only the transformation of individuals but also the perceived state of the social environment by which they are affected. Desistance is an individual and social relational process (Weaver, 2015), potentially because of an ongoing negotiation between the self and society, as it likely involves both the transformation of individuals and the process of belonging to a community and society. Ugelvik (2022) demonstrated that in addition to behavioural and identity transformation, being trusted as part of tertiary desistance plays a crucial role in the desistance process of ex-prisoners. If ‘the primary, secondary, and tertiary dimensions of desistance are not sequential’ (Day and Halsey, 2022: 6), exploring tertiary desistance is likewise integral to a comprehensive understanding of the desistance process because tertiary desistance may simultaneously occur alongside primary and secondary desistance as well as influence other phases of desistance. While there is an ongoing debate over whether identity transformation precedes behavioural change (c.f., Giordano, 2022; Rocque et al., 2016), there is no discussion about how tertiary desistance comes into play in this interactive relationship. The possibility of tertiary desistance influencing primary and secondary desistance needs to be taken into account in desistance research.

Tertiary desistance is based on the assumption that society tolerates ex-offenders. However, tertiary desistance does not embrace the way society currently treats them even though the impact of social stigma on the desistance process has been well documented (e.g., Jackl, 2021). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) revealed the structural infliction

of pain on ex-offenders who struggled to avoid trouble (see also Halsey et al., 2017). Perhaps what is needed for desistance is not only the transformation of behaviours and identities in ex-offenders but also a change in how society views them. In this regard, Maruna (2017:13) proposed making desistance a social movement by altering the perspective of society toward desistance ‘from individual journeys to a much more collective experience, drawing attention to the macro-political issues involved in crime, justice and reintegration’. Once society becomes more tolerant toward ex-offenders and welcomes them as community members who once erred but are now endeavouring to go straight, rather than as outsiders who are marginalised and ostracised by society, the desistance process may become less painful. This societal transformation will require raising awareness of social harm inflicted on those oppressed in society and encouraging consideration of a method for repairing these social harms (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007). We believe that a focus on tertiary desistance will lead to the development of institutional and policy-level responses to desistance, which could eventually have a positive impact not only on practitioners, but also on ex-offenders in terms of the institutional and policy support for desistance.

Limitations

Our study had some limitations. First, we restricted the database search to peer-reviewed articles. Given that qualitative research tends to be published as book chapters (Booth, 2016), which is a major methodological approach in desistance research, our findings should be interpreted with caution. Second, our search methodology, which concentrated on English-written literature, could have engendered a geographical imbalance in our findings. Finally, similar to Leclair et al. (2022:17), we sometimes set ‘arbitrary boundaries’ to select the studies. For example, a few peer-reviewed journal articles did not explicitly mention desistance theory. To provide an overall picture of desistance

research, we made a subjective decision to include or exclude studies based on whether they touched on any aspect of the four types of desistance theory. As in the study by Leclair et al. (2022:18), given that we aimed to ‘produce a global portrait of the trends’ in desistance research, we believe that our approach is justifiable.

Conclusion

Desistance has been one of the most widely examined topics in criminology over the past decade. There is a growing accumulation of knowledge on how and why people reduce or stop offending. In addition to the expansion of desistance research, a diversity in desistance research has been observed. The rapid growth of desistance research has necessitated clarification of its overall characteristics. We have provided an overview of English-language peer-reviewed journal articles on desistance from 2011 to 2020, which makes our research unique. Our investigation is the first to provide a numerical understanding of the variability in desistance research in terms of methodologies, definitions, and theories. This study’s findings are helpful for novice researchers to grasp the overall picture of desistance research, as well as for experienced scholars to identify research agendas in desistance.

However, because of the nature of the SQLR method, we could not explore the content of each study in depth. Therefore, our next step would be to integrate desistance research with other systematic methodologies to provide a more detailed picture of the research. For example, given the predominance of the qualitative approach in desistance research, a meta-synthesis may be useful. This represents an interpretive synthesis of the extant qualitative investigations, involving a process of comparing, translating, and scrutinizing the original findings to derive novel interpretations (Zimmer, 2006). As Martinez and Abrams (2013) found in their qualitative meta-synthesis approach to in-

formal social support among returning young offenders, using such an approach may facilitate a meaningful interpretation of the fragmented findings obtained in this study. Alternatively, a scoping review may be useful to help organise existing knowledge in line with specific research objectives or research questions (Munn et al., 2018). As evidenced by Villeneuve et al.'s (2020) scoping review of assisted desistance, scoping may enable us to clarify key concepts/definitions in the desistance literature, identify key characteristics or factors related to desistance, and analyse further gaps in desistance research. Such systematic studies will provide a more detailed and in-depth understanding of desistance research.

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¹ For this reason, we only offer descriptive statistics. Additionally, as our SQLR results offer the ‘population’ of desistance studies rather than a ‘sample’, inferential statistics would be inappropriate (c.f., Leclair et al., 2021: 8).

² A link to the entire list of identified studies is available at

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GQdWPBtdRiksEuO1J3wBIJCAgTvql5Kc/view> .

³ We also attempted to create a database for the follow-up period. However, because the follow-up period was not clearly mentioned in many studies, we were unable to do so. As a consequence, we encountered difficulty in delineating the degree of overlap between primary desistance investigations and studies concerning recidivism, which employ a binary measure to gauge the success or failure of reentry.

⁴ Another possibility is that we targeted English-written desistance research. While we speak a different language, we limited our search to English in order to be fair to other languages.