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Employment paths after release from prison: The meaning of work for desistance and social integration

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Abstract
Employment is central for social integration and desistance from crime after release from prison. While prior research has focused mainly on the effect of employment on recidivism or desistance from crime, we have less knowledge of the meanings released individuals ascribe to employment in their social integration and desistance processes. In this article we narratively analyse longitudinal interview data with 22 individuals before and after their release from Finnish open prisons. We identified three employment paths after release, represented as narratives: 1) inclusion, 2) exclusion, and 3) liminality in relation to labour market participation and social integration. The findings show that employment after release was perceived both as an important routine activity and as a prosocial change that supports desistance, but that access to it is largely shaped by individuals' social capital. We argue that exploring different employment paths and conceptualising liminality in integration are crucial for understanding both desistance processes and broader social integration.

Keywords
desistance, employment, narrative criminology, release from prison, social integration

Introduction
Life after prison comes with a range of challenges. Compared to the general population, released prisoners are more often unemployed (Laine et al., 2024; Ramakers et al., 2025) and homeless (Aaltonen et al., 2021; Nilsson et al., 2023), and face major challenges in education and health (Visher & Travis, 2011). Furthermore, recidivism rates among released prisoners are notably high (Yukhnenko et al., 2023).

Prior research defines having a job as key to social integration and reducing crime after release from prison (Kolbeck, 2022; Rhoden et al., 2022; Skardhamar & Telle, 2012). However, Ramakers et al. (2025) have highlighted that most released prisoners are unemployed – despite the extensive focus on employment in rehabilitation and resettlement programmes. Much of the prior research has focused on how employment

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affects recidivism or desistance from crime, but we have much less knowledge of the many meanings the prisoners themselves give to employment paths and their potential connections to social integration and desistance.

We seek to address this gap by qualitatively examining released prisoners' expectations and experiences of different employment paths after release, and how these connect to perceptions of social integration and desistance. In doing so, we examine the challenges these people face in aiming to secure employment. The article contributes to the discussion on the relationship between social integration and desistance. Our analysis is based on longitudinal qualitative data from 60 interviews collected in two to three sweeps. In total 22 individuals were interviewed before and after their release from open prisons in Finland. We use narrative analysis to study their stories about work attachment paths (Presser & Sandberg, 2015; Riessman, 2008). We have chosen to focus on employment, as our interviewees prominently highlighted how not having employment made social integration after release difficult. Employment after release was perceived both as an important routine activity and as a prosocial change that supports desistance, but access to it was largely shaped by individuals' social capital. Furthermore, we argue that exploring different employment paths and conceptualising liminality in integration is crucial for understanding both desistance processes and broader social integration.

Social integration and employment among released prisoners

Social integration after release from prison is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes various factors in a person's life (Visher & Travis, 2003), such as resources (e.g. housing and employment), networks (e.g. social relationships and roles), and psychosocial (e.g. feeling valued) aspects (Wyse, 2018). Social integration is individual, personal, and at the same time contingent on community and state-level policies (Maruna, 2017; Visher & Travis, 2003). The concept of social integration largely overlaps with concepts like community integration, re-entry, (re)-integration, and resettlement – all of which seek to describe to what degree an individual is included in society after release from prison.

Prior research on social integration after release from prison has predominantly focused on resource-related factors, particularly employment, and highlighted their central role in the social integration process (Harding et al., 2014; Novo-Corti & Barreiro-Gen, 2015). Accessing work after release is, however, difficult. A recent study of incarcerated Dutch men showed that only 15% were employed upon release, and this share stayed rather stable over time (55 months, see Ramakers et al., 2025). Those who do find jobs often face low-wage, precarious, or physically demanding work, and are further burdened by the stigma of a criminal history (Sheppard & Ricciardelli, 2020). The idea of successful integration through work is hence unrealistic for many. Ramakers et al. (2025, p. 17) therefore argue that the current focus on employment in re-entry programmes is not sufficient: "instead of viewing those out of work as reintegration failures, re-entry professionals may help individuals strive for more realistic conformities that do not include formal employment."

The stigma associated with having been in prison has been identified as a factor that may hinder employment and social integration (Lindsay, 2022; Pager, 2003; Sheppard & Ricciardelli, 2020). Having a history of incarceration raises concerns about trustworthiness and potential criminality (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016), and released prisoners often face additional discrimination linked to multiple stigmatised identities (LeBel, 2012). Stigma can shape both the employment opportunities available to released prisoners and their own expectations of these opportunities (Sheppard & Ricciardelli, 2020). Managing the

employment-related stigma has been shown to require strategic identity management and support from others to demonstrate to employers that the individual is capable and has changed (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016).

Construction and manufacturing have in several studies been shown to be the most common industries employing released prisoners (Laine et al., 2025; Schnepel, 2018), when looking at formal employment. There is, however, a scarcity of research focusing on job types other than formal employment, such as off-the-books jobs or illegal jobs. There have been some attempts to broaden the understanding of employment after release from prison, distinguishing between self-employment, legitimate employment and "under-the-table" jobs (Larroulet et al., 2023). Larroulet et al. (2023) found that a significant number of women released from prison who reported working were self-employed, particularly in under-the-table arrangements.

The connection between employment and desistance

The desistance process is deeply intertwined with processes of social integration. In this regard, we align with Graham & McNeill, 2017, p. 435) in understanding desistance as "a dynamic process of human development—one that is situated in and profoundly affected by its social contexts—in which persons move away from offending and towards social re/integration." However, this does not imply that maintained desistance is equivalent to social integration (Farrall et al., 2014; Gålnander, 2023; Lussier & McCuish, 2016; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). What consistently stands out is the interconnectedness of social integration and desistance and their contingency on societal and structural factors. Recent theorisation conceptualises reintegration as encompassing not only social inclusion, but also personal development, moral repair, material resources, legal status, and civic-political rights and participation (Rubio Arnal & McNeill, 2023).

The role of employment in the desistance process can be understood through inter-connected dimensions of social inclusion, social control, identity, and social capital. From a processual perspective, desistance unfolds gradually as the repeated pursuit and achievement of pro-social goals strengthen desistance (Gålnander, 2020; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Similarly, in the context of social inclusion and employment, meeting basic needs and social integration enables individuals to hope, plan, and act toward further social integration and desistance (Gålnander, 2020). Employment can also be associated with informal social control that supports desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2003), primarily because employed individuals tend to structure their daily routines in ways that differ substantially from those without employment.

Employment provides access to identities that carry social value and offer the possibility of constructing a new, conventional self (Opsal, 2012; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). For example, it has been shown that the possibility for hard work and responsibility, particularly through employment in the construction industry, can be a resource for desistance from crime (Aagesen, 2024). However, Österman (2018, p. 35) suggests that it "may be less the shift in identity per se, and more the social capital gains that such a shift enables, that is of relevance" when attempting to understand desistance processes. Pro-social capital and high-quality relationships have indeed been shown to play an important role in supporting desistance (Farrall, 2004; Kay, 2022; Österman, 2022). In relation to employment, social capital functions in a reciprocal way: it can be a prerequisite for accessing employment, while employment itself serves as a context in which social capital can be further generated (Abeling-Judge, 2021).

Previous qualitative research specifically studying post-release employment has suggested that, while employment may reshape the values and goals of former prisoners, this occurs only once they have adopted a prodesistance identity (Rhoden et al., 2022). Moreover, the job market for released prisoners is unstable, and this affects their social integration and desistance (Harding et al., 2014; Opsal, 2012). Opsal (2012) has demonstrated how released female prisoners attempting to desist from crime use employment both to meet financial needs and as an opportunity to create new pro-social lives and identities. However, the jobs available were never of good quality, not full time, did not pay enough to make ends meet, and were unstable. As a consequence, some went back to criminal activity.

The research context

Our study participants served their sentences in Finnish open prisons. These are small institutions with a lower security level than closed prisons, holding between 40 and 130 prisoners. As part of Finland's emphasis on rehabilitation and "penal moderation" (Kivivuori et al., 2023), open prisons have historically held a prominent position in the Finnish prison system, and about one-third of prisoners are placed in open prisons (Prison and Probation Service of Finland, 2024). Prisoners in open prisons are obligated to participate in work, education, or other activities such as rehabilitation as long as their health, functionality, or age allows (Finnish Imprisonment Act, 2005, 8 § 2).

Since the economic depression in the 1990 s, the labour market attachment of Finnish prisoners has been very poor. Contrary to the rest of Finnish society, the employment rate of prisoners did not recover after the recession and has sunk to even lower levels since (Aaltonen et al., 2024). The off-the-books sector is estimated to be smaller in Finland than in most European countries (HTSY, 2022). Before their imprisonment, 75% of male prisoners and 86% of female prisoners report having been outside the workforce (Rautanen et al., 2024). This while 62% of the men and 55% of the women in prison considered themselves fully able to work (Rautanen et al., 2024). Prisoners' level of education is moreover notably lower than that of the general population (Aaltonen et al., 2024).

The present study

There is a need for qualitative inquiry into how people released from prison ascribe meaning to different employment paths. By "meaning," we refer to what employment signifies to individuals and how it makes sense within their broader life narratives. Sensemaking, in many ways, is what narration is fundamentally about (Presser, 2009). Moreover, it is important to understand where released prisoners encounter barriers and challenges when trying to secure employment.

In this study, we ask two questions: 1) What employment paths do individuals released from open prisons narrate having experienced after release? 2) How are the meanings they assign to employment connected to their social integration and desistance processes?

Data and Methods

The data consists of qualitative semi-structured longitudinal interviews with individuals released from open prison, collected between January 2019 and December 2020. The participants included in the data set were interviewed two or three times: right before their release (first sweep n=22), six months after the first interview (second sweep n=22), and 18 months after the first interview (third sweep, n=16). This brings the total to 60 interviews

(22 interviewees). Our analysis mainly focused on the after-release interviews, while the first sweep serves as background information.

Qualitative longitudinal research allows for an exploration of the dynamic nature of life, following individuals "in 'real' time, as lives unfold" (Neale, 2019, p. 1). Although this study does not primarily focus on changes occurring over time, the design in which the person is interviewed several times creates an opportunity to provide a deeper understanding than cross-sectional data. Repeated interviewing allows for unveiling additional "nuances, ambiguity, and complexity" as individuals articulate life experiences from diverse perspectives across multiple interactions (Goyes & Sandberg, 2025, p. 18).

Interviewees were recruited from five open prisons in Finland. Individuals aged 20 to 55 who were to be released within three months were invited to participate. All possible participants were informed individually about the research. Participation was voluntary and based on the informed consent of the participant. The project received approval from the Ethical Review Board of the University of Helsinki. The in-prison interviews lasted around 45 minutes, without the presence of any prison officer. The participants were between 22 and 51 years old; two were women. The participants were serving sentences for a range of crimes, most commonly violent offences or offences against property. Almost all had a criminal history of several years, including many offences and sanctions. The second-sweep interviews took place mainly in cafés or libraries (on average 50 minutes). Two of the participants were reincarcerated and interviewed in prison. The third-sweep interviews were conducted via telephone or video call due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions (on average 35 minutes). While the remote interviewing sometimes made it easier to discuss sensitive topics, it inevitably resulted in shorter interviews. Much of the small talk, although not directly related to the topic but still informative, went unspoken. The first author conducted, transcribed and pseudonymised all the interviews.

Most participants lived on their own; five lived with a girlfriend, wife, or kids. Many had children, but only a few lived with them. A few had partners with whom they had chosen not to cohabit. There were several divorces, breakups and changes of partners between the interview sweeps. Many participants described problematic use of alcohol or drugs prior to their last prison sentence, and for quite a number of them the problematic relationship with these substances prevailed after imprisonment. Two were homeless for a longer period, but several had living arrangements that did not align with their preferences or had problems finding a suitable apartment.

The interviewing was narrative in nature, covering four main topics: life prior to the sentence, experiences of the current situation (in prison or after release), thoughts and experiences connected to release from prison (including social integration), and thoughts about desistance and the future. Previous analyses of the same data have primarily focused on desistance (Villman, 2025), while the meanings of employment have not been analysed in the previous studies published from this data.

Narrative analysis

In this article, we focus on personal stories about people's lives after prison. In line with narrative criminology, we understand that stories can give meaning to experiences, tell us about perceptions and values, and make connections between past experiences and future aspirations (Presser & Sandberg, 2015; Sandberg et al., 2015). A key concern in narrative criminology is that narratives not only highlight the narrator's agency but also reveal patterns and indicate how stories reflect and are shaped by cultural contexts (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). People can narrate stories in various and complex ways, yet cultural

structures and context limit how stories are typically told (e.g. Presser, 2009; Sandberg et al., 2015). We think it is important not to overlook how social structures, stigma, and other factors shape the possibilities of securing employment.

Thematic narrative analysis was used as the primary method. Thematic analysis is the most prevalent form of narrative analysis, focusing on the content of stories, i.e. what is said (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). When analysing themes in the data, we were inspired by narrative positioning analysis, focusing on how the characters are positioned in relation to other people within the stories (Bamberg, 1997). Here, our interest was to see how the interviewees narratively position themselves in relation to the labour market and, relatedly, how they position themselves within the broader societal context and its norms.

The analysis started with looking broadly and inductively at stories concerning obstacles to social integration after release. At this stage, we were interested in all obstacles. Shortly after, we narrowed the focus to stories of work, as the interviewees prominently described this as a key barrier to integration. In the second analysis phase, we coded the narrative segments concerning work more systematically (in Atlas.ti), and here we focused on finding meanings of different employment paths. The story content guided the coding and we constructed three main thematic narratives related to employment and inclusion. Within these narratives, we have analysed how employment is connected to social integration and desistance from crime.

Findings

We found three main narratives that describe different employment paths for individuals released from prison: 1) inclusion, 2) exclusion, and 3) liminality in relation to labour market participation and social integration. In the following analysis, we examine how the role and meaning of work is framed in these narratives, and how the narratives are related to social integration and desistance. Figure 1 illustrates these different employment paths and their differences, both concerning obstacles to legal employment and the meaning of work. Our choice to centre employment echoes the understanding of integration among the interviewees. For all, legal employment was, interestingly enough, perceived as a central feature for being or not being integrated in mainstream society. Furthermore, the interviewees referred to several types of employment statuses. We distinguish between legal, illegal, and off-the-books work. With illegal work we refer to activities such as selling and smuggling drugs, while when referring to off-the-books work, we consider work that is legal but where incomes are not reported to tax authorities.

Inclusion narratives

The inclusion narrative was used by persons who had succeeded in securing employment after release. Giving an exact number of how many were employed is difficult, as it took many months for some to get a job, while others had work right away but were unemployed some months later. At least nine of the 22 participants did have legal employment at some point during the follow-up period.

Some of the interviewees were returning to their old work. This was the case for Ilmari. He had previously been employed by a friend, who had promised that if he wanted to get his life back on track, he could come back to work for the company. This was a motivating factor for Ilmari while in prison, and he started working as soon as possible after release:

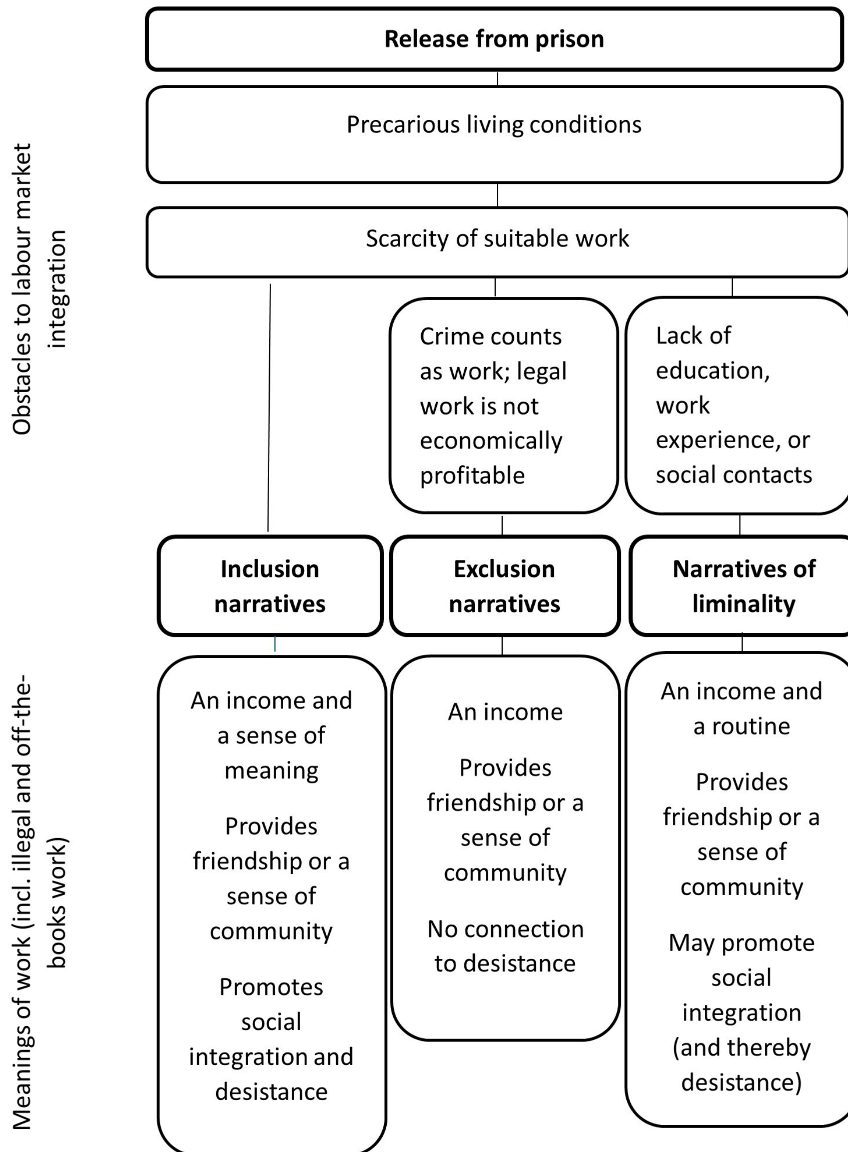

Figure 1. Employment paths after release from prison

> well, the next day I started work again. Just so it wouldn't turn into that kind of… I mean, I could have taken the rest of the week off, but why, when there was work available? So I just went back to work.

The unsaid in the quotation by Ilmari, "so it wouldn't turn into that kind of…", is a gap that several interviewees mention as a risk when trying to desist from crime upon release. Having too much free time, inactivity, or days without structure can be challenging. Activity is needed in order not to slip back into the old criminal lifestyle, but also more generally to experience meaningfulness in one's life and not to "feel useless" in society, as expressed by Juho:

> It's something that gives structure to my days. And of course, there's the financial side of it too, which is nice, but… […] But the most important thing is probably that it gives my days some meaning, so I don't just sit around wondering what to do. Just existing and doing nothing has always been really difficult for me in the long run. And if I

> don't have work or anything to do, I really quickly start feeling useless and like I don't have a purpose. That's why I see working as an essential part of my life – it just makes everything easier.

Nevertheless, going back to one's old profession or work was not always something the interviewees wanted. This could be because the old work environment was connected to the criminal activity, which one wanted to distance oneself from, but also because of stigma. Prior research has shown that demonstrating to others that one has changed, and thereby overcoming stigma, requires substantial identity management (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016). When Matias was interviewed in prison, he planned to return to his old job. However, he changed his mind when he was offered a different job, finding the idea of a fresh start more appealing, as he would not have to face the comments from old colleagues:

> Interviewer: So, last time we talked, the plan was that you would go back to [the old workplace] to work?
>
> Matias: Yeah, that was the plan. But it felt a bit… I don't know. […]. It's a small workplace, so everyone knows everyone. And when everyone knows everyone, it means everyone talks. Everyone knows I've been in prison. And I know I would be welcome back to work there, but I just don't want to have that feeling all the time – like stepping into a room and everything suddenly goes quiet, you know? And I know people talk behind my back because I noticed it myself. […] So I felt it was better to leave that behind. And since I got another good job now, I'll just go with that instead.

Compared to the exclusion narrative of individuals outside of the labour market, stigma was seldom raised as a problem in the inclusion narratives. However, even if stigma was not typically directly depicted in these stories, there were hints of stigma, as discussed above in the hopes of having a fresh start. Furthermore, having been in prison clearly delimited employment channels; almost all the work contracts were arranged with the help of relatives or friends. This highlights how social capital shapes both the employment opportunities available to people released from prison and, for those with options, their preferences for where to work (cf. Abeling-Judge, 2021).

Most of the interviewees who had secured employment saw it as the key factor in feeling socially integrated and in helping them desist from crime. Having a secured income and something meaningful to fill one's days with made it easier to stick to intentions to desist from crime. Even if the inclusion stories described positionings of currently being included in the labour market and society, recurring topics included the precariousness of living conditions, work situation, and social integration. The accumulated burden of poor health, debts, economic difficulties, and housing problems made work and desistance challenging. An example of how demanding life after prison can be, even when employment is secured and the individual has disengaged from crime, is illustrated by Henrik's story. The prison personnel had helped him to find employment and a place to live after release. When he arrived at the rented house, it had no furniture, problems with the electrics, no tap water, and the water in the well was dirty. He did not have any money, and tried to fix what he could outside of working hours. Even though Henrik lived in poor conditions, he nonetheless talked about having found a "dream place," appreciating having a place of his own. His work was not fun or stimulating, but it was okay: "you have to work

to earn money." Starting work, he had worried about how he would be accepted. But that proved to be no problem:

> The work environment has some really nice people. I had some issues with my car, and one guy immediately gave me his number, saying, "If you need help with it, take my number – I'll come help and bring tools if needed." That was such a kind and thoughtful gesture.

Having someone to help you out is a small but important gesture for social integration. The employer and at least some of the co-workers knew about his prior sentence, but this proved not to be an issue. At the last interview, Henrik talks about his co-workers as friends. The work is okay, it pays his bills. He would rather do his own stuff, but debts need to be paid. He is content with life, although he has future aspirations of working with something more creative and of having someone to share his life with. For him, desistance from crime was largely interwoven with social integration upon release, a cumulative process of meeting basic needs and achieving personal goals that, in turn, reinforced desistance (Gålnander, 2020).

The inclusion narrative depicts not only labour market and social integration but also intentions to stop committing crimes. All the interviewees in this theme intended to desist from crime, however, they placed different emphasis on work for their social integration and desistance processes. To some, desistance was the primary goal, with work supporting that goal but without being a prerequisite. To others, desistance was important, but not the primary goal in their life stories. While social integration supported their desistance process, having a job and being socially integrated were valuable in their own right.

Exclusion narratives

The second main narrative was used by interviewees who were outside the labour market and considered that, for them, legal employment was not, and never would be, an option. This narrative was the least used among the interviewees (n=3). The small number might be explained by the gradual release process in open prisons that emphasises rehabilitation and integration. Even if the number was small, this narrative portrays an important contrast to the other two. Legal employment was neither attractive nor attainable, for some because they considered criminal activity as their work and were focused on pursuing that career, and for others because legal employment was not an economically profitable alternative. In these stories, there was not necessarily a clear division between illegal work and working off the books: the interviewees had been or were engaged in both.

Although some stories indicated that working off the books can offer similar activities and financial support to official employment, interestingly, for a few, like Jaakko, working illegally and off the books implied that they did not see themselves as a part of society. In Jaakko's case, this became apparent when the interviewer asked whether he had experienced difficulties with returning to society upon release, and he answered: "No, I haven't returned [to society] after that first one-and-a-half-year prison sentence. I haven't returned. I've been involved in shady dealings." Even if Jaakko had been released for several longer periods, he did not consider himself to be part of society. Interestingly, it was the illegality of employment that he linked to exclusion from society. Other interviewees did to a greater extent see themselves as part of society but similarly described that they chose to work off the books, as they could earn more money this way. Tapani, for instance, worked full time off the books in construction. The reason was debts. If he

had a legal income, most of it would go to debt collection. Moreover, he had many other expenses, such as expensive medication and rent, which could be covered by social welfare with this arrangement.

In this narrative, exclusion from the labour market was not due to a lack of ability or will to work. For example, Petteri had a long history of drug abuse and criminal involvement but was making efforts to work off the books as much as his health permitted. His primary income was basic social assistance, and did not consider a legal income possible, because then he would lose his benefits and most of the income would go to debt collection. Having something to do was still essential and the friends he had were through off-the-books construction work. Petteri lived a rather isolated life trying to distance himself from prior involvement in criminal activity, and he felt lonely. This echoes prior findings, that desistance might come with certain personal costs, such as loneliness and isolation (Gålnander, 2020; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

Many who found work after release worked in the construction industry, which was attractive both for those who wanted to pay taxes and those who did not. Aagesen (2024) argues that in the construction industry, experiences from a criminal lifestyle can have transferable value to the conventional labour market. As one of Aagesen's interviewees described it, it is a "testosterone-filled industry, where you can be tough and things like that" (2024, p. 94). Greater availability of construction and manufacturing jobs at the time of release has been associated with reductions in recidivism (Schnepel, 2018); however, no such association has been found in Finland (Laine et al., 2025).

That construction is easily done off the books in Finland was confirmed by Jaakko. Even if he wanted a "normal" job, he realised that with his lifestyle and background, it was no longer feasible to get one. Moreover, he mentioned high taxes as a reason for not wanting legal work.

> Well, I'd go to work off the books, okay, I could work at a construction site completely under the table. I mean, it's really hard and almost impossible [to get legal employment]. Those days aren't coming back. I was damn happy – I had a regular job, and I was in a relationship. But there's no way in hell I'm working on the books if they take a third of my gross pay. There's nothing left, for fuck's sake. Yeah. What the hell are those politicians thinking?

The experience of being excluded from the labour market often overlapped with stigma and social exclusion. For example, Tapani described that his primary goal was to become more integrated in society, but it was not easy. He experienced the stigma of having been in prison as a barrier to social integration and labour market participation, which made an internal impact, creating a sense of being labelled: "It may be that it feels tougher than it actually is." He felt like a second-class citizen, and despite efforts to change that perception, the label remained (cf. Sheppard & Ricciardelli, 2020).

A shared experience in the exclusion narrative was the accumulated burden of highly unstable and precarious living conditions, marked by homelessness, financial hardship, substance abuse, upcoming sentences, and social stigmatisation. These conditions played a central role in hindering employment, social integration and desistance from crime. Even if these interviewees talked about weariness with the criminal lifestyle and a wish to leave it behind, their stories also expressed a sense of being stuck in crime and excluded from society, unable to change their circumstances. Hopelessness and limited options were

present in these stories. However, the narrators also described activity aiming to secure their financial situations, through working off the books or through continuing crime, when legal work was not an attractive or attainable option.

Narratives of liminality – waiting and hoping

The third main narrative included stories of liminal social integration, stemming from a sense of instability due to the lack of stable employment. The interviewees talked about the time after release as a "gap": they had high hopes and wishes, but these did not become a reality as the months unfolded, for instance because of unemployment or waiting for job application results. Other challenges to integration in the stories included similar issues as in the previous narratives: debt and financial strain, health issues, loneliness, homelessness, struggles with drugs or alcohol, and the uncertainty of awaiting a new sentence. What differentiated the liminality narratives from the exclusion narratives is the hope to secure legal work and desist from crime in future. The liminal stage was perceived as a life phase.

Unemployment was the key aspect contributing to the feeling of being in a gap. It implied economic strain which made social integration in other areas hard, as the primary focus was on making ends meet (consistent with Gålnander, 2020). As Aarne commented regarding living on a labour market subsidy: "a person wants something to live on, not just survival, because right now, the income I have only allows me to stay alive."

Some of the interviewees had had employment off the books for shorter periods of time, while others had not been employed at all after release. Many described doing handyman tasks and helping family and friends (e.g. renovations and fixing cars) and usually received some payment in return. But they wished for longer and more stable employment, both economically and as an activity and routine. When explaining the reasons for their unemployment, they either raised physical or mental health issues or difficulties in securing legal employment. Interestingly, most interviewees were optimistic about their chances of finding a job in the future. This was despite the fact that finding employment in a competitive Finnish labour market probably would be challenging: some had been out of the workforce for years, while others had no work experience or education beyond elementary school. The optimistic narrative can be understood as "imaginative storytelling" (Sandberg & Tutenges, 2025, p. 32), helping individuals remain hopeful that the future can be different, even as they recount the difficulties of securing employment.

Those interviewees with tertiary education still found it difficult to secure legal employment after release. This was the case with Samuli, who had got himself a profession while in prison and was really optimistic when interviewed in prison. At the second interview, he was busy taking care of practical duties at home and for friends, but nothing that gave him an income. He strongly desired legal employment, as he saw it as central for his social integration and desistance, stating directly that "working helps you to connect to society." To avoid stigma, he did not mention his time in prison when looking for jobs (cf. Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016). He had several job opportunities that he believed would be offered to him and was not worried about finding employment. However, at the third interview, he was still unemployed. He had had some shorter off-the-books jobs, but not yet legal employment. He had moved to another city, partly because of unemployment, and he had hopes that it would be easier to find employment there. He admitted having lost his motivation to continue job seeking when it proved to be so difficult:

> somehow over there in [X region of] Finland, getting a job seemed to be much more difficult than around here. Even though I hadn't gotten a job yet, I still believed that it's much easier to find one here […] After some time, I just didn't have the energy to look for or apply for jobs anymore.

On the one hand, this quotation from Samuli highlights optimism for the future. On the other hand, similarly to other narrators, he depicts structural reasons, such as a challenging context of job seeking. Hope was coupled with a realism.

If the participants who used the liminal narrative had secured employment, it was typically temporary, short term, or off the books, and it did not offer a stable life. Reasons given for working off the books in this narrative included debt collection or to get more than their primary income, the basic unemployment or disability benefit. Positive aspects of working off the books were also raised. For many, it gave them freedom to choose how much and when they worked. In the same way as legal work, working off the books was seen as an important social arena or as meaningful as it provided a routine: "The work is very important, it gives me something to commit to. It provides its own rhythm for life" (Marko).

A typical trait of the liminal narrative was the constant waiting for something to happen: waiting for a job application response, waiting for an answer from social services, waiting for a doctor's appointment, or waiting for an upcoming sentence. The interviewees recounted life being on pause – in a gap – while waiting for something that would make their social integration and life proceed. It was striking how many continued to wait throughout the period from the first to the last interview. Waiting appeared as both an external reality and a state of mind, reflecting not only a sense of exclusion from control over one's own life, but also broader social exclusion. An example of such waiting was Mikael, who was working at an NGO while eagerly waiting to get onto a training course that he had talked about in the first interview. In the second interview a year later, he was still waiting:

> No, I ended up... I liked my job [at the NGO] so much that I stayed there. And now it's kind of like, I've been waiting all of August for them to negotiate something there – I mean, at the workplace. And I thought I'd wait a little longer, but if I don't hear anything from them soon, then I might consider going to this [training]. (Mikael)

The training course he had planned to take had been postponed. Mikael was satisfied with having a job. Still, his narrative revolved around the sense of being only partially integrated into society; the job at the NGO was paid by a pay subsidy, resulting in low monthly income and persistent financial strain. Additionally, he was at risk of losing his apartment. Occasional drug use also posed challenges, such as the loss of his driver's licence, which he needed for work. The example of Mikael highlights how the liminality of social integration can continue despite employment, and waiting can make life stressful.

Navigating liminality was often challenging because the individuals lacked structured routine and financial stability while the future looked uncertain. Similarly, the insecure job situations of short-term contracts or off-the-books work induced stress. In this aspect, liminality and waiting may hinder desistance, as the imagined future does not progress (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). When the liminal status prevailed without integration, desistance optimism was replaced with inactivity.

Taken together, the liminality in most stories negatively impacted the desistance process over time. Even when the desire and ambition to leave behind criminal behaviour were strong, the challenges of the liminal phase undermined both motivation and long-term perseverance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Much of the prior research has focused on the effect of employment on recidivism or desistance from crime (Kolbeck, 2022; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014; Skardhamar & Telle, 2012), but we have much less knowledge of the meanings prisoners themselves ascribe to employment in their social integration and desistance processes. In this article, we have explored what different employment paths mean for social integration and desistance to people released from open prisons. The analysis revealed three main narratives that describe concrete work paths after release from prison and the meaning of work and its connection to their social integration and desistance from crime.

The first main narrative described *inclusion* in the labour market. Those positioning themselves as included had secured employment or some form of social integration, and most also narrated successful attempts in desisting. The second main narrative depicted *exclusion* from the labour market, where legal employment and social integration were perceived as unrealistic and therefore not even aspired to. The last main narrative was of *liminality* in labour market participation and social integration. These stories depicted high hopes after release, but the reality was difficult because of feeling stuck in a gap between being unemployed and employed, waiting for job application results.

Working was important in all three narratives. The meaning of work was primarily connected to securing finances, giving one something to do, a sense of meaning, and providing a social network or friends. It was not always the work itself that was experienced as meaningful, but rather the abstract idea of work. Having a job was seen as central to social integration, serving as an important routine activity that structured daily life (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Employment supported belonging to society and helped people to avoid the stigma of having been in prison.

There were, however, differences between the three narratives in how the meaning of employment was understood in relation to social integration and desistance. In the inclusion narrative, legal employment provided not only material and social integration, but also resources for personal, moral and legal integration (cf. Rubio Arnal & McNeill, 2023), resources that were not accessible without employment or through off-the-books work in the other two narratives. This finding highlights the interdependence of different aspects of social integration (Rubio Arnal & McNeill, 2023): how employment should be considered not as a distinct component in the social integration of released prisoners, but rather as a central part of it, shaping and shaped by their overall social integration.

Having employment was in the inclusion narrative seen as key for desistance from crime. For those wishing to desist, work was seen as something that helped them keep away from crime, a routine activity providing informal social control that helped structure their days (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Similarly to Opsal's (2012) findings, we found that the released prisoners attempting to desist from crime used employment as an opportunity to create new pro-social lives. Employment after release was described as a form of prosocial change that supported desistance, not necessarily by providing a new identity (cf. Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), but by opening up new possibilities in life. This was the case even if the jobs were seldom of good quality, i.e. they were in unstable sectors, low-paid

and not perceived as interesting (see also Harding et al., 2014; Opsal, 2012). We also found, in the narratives of liminality, that off-the-books work supported desistance ambitions, as these jobs in many ways offered the same type of meaning as legal employment – routine and an income. At the same time, the liminality affected desistance ambitions negatively over time, as the challenges connected to integration undermined the motivation and perseverance. This corresponds with the concept of "liminal desistance" (Healy, 2014, p. 878) where individuals have a clear desire to change their lives and move away from crime, yet find that their current circumstances prevent them from making that change. The "liminal desisters" in our study could not create new pro-social lives because they were stuck in a liminal phase where their integration did not progress in any direction. Constant waiting affected their agency negatively.

Recent studies have increasingly emphasised that long-term, stable employment is out of reach for the majority of released prisoners (Ramakers et al., 2025). Even so, most interviewees in this study expressed a strong desire to find employment, identifying it as key to social integration. This firm orientation to work in the stories may reflect the fact that our participants were recruited from open prisons, which emphasise employment after release. A limitation of this study is that we did not interview people from closed prisons to see if their perceptions would differ. The research also does not sufficiently incorporate a life-course perspective, despite the use of longitudinal interviews. The life prior to imprisonment, including personal histories and societal contexts that shape desistance and social integration (see Laine et al., 2024; Rubio Arnal & McNeill, 2023), is not adequately considered. The high importance of work and wishes to gain employment should, however, be considered when planning and supporting social integration after release. Support may be particularly crucial for those experiencing liminal social integration, who wish to desist from crime but struggle to become fully integrated into society, as the critical period after release seems to be central in both desistance and successful reintegration. It is perhaps at this transitional stage that society's resources and efforts to support released prisoners should be more strategically directed.

One important finding was that, regardless of their labour market participation, the interviewees' life circumstances were constrained (e.g. by poverty, housing problems, substance use, or debts). The precariousness was most pressing for those excluded from or with liminal attachment to the labour market. From a policy perspective, this needs to be acknowledged when trying to support labour market participation. Moreover, it is problematic that the available career paths for released prisoners are so few. For many of the interviewees, construction work was and had long been their sector of employment, either on or off the books. Those interviewees in this study who succeeded in finding employment did so primarily through personal contacts of family and friends. This highlights the importance of social capital after release from prison (Abeling-Judge, 2021; Österman, 2022).

We can align with previous research suggesting that formal employment should not be seen as the only definer of successful integration and that the variety of employment paths needs to be acknowledged (Larroulet et al., 2023; Ramakers et al., 2025). We found that off-the-books work often had similar meanings to formal work, such as securing finances and a sphere of activity. At least some prisoners talked about off-the-books work in a way that supported both social integration and desistance from crime. This was especially the case for those using the narrative of liminal integration, who were wishing to integrate and desist. To them, work off the books was either a financial necessity because of debts, or the only employment they were able to land. Despite these pressing needs and the general

instability of off-the-books work, the financial and social resources gained from the work did strengthen the feeling of inclusion. It offered more opportunities than having no work at all. For those using the narrative of being excluded from work, again, the meanings of off-the-books work was similar, but it was not seen as helping them to integrate into society or desist from crime. These findings have implications for understanding the role of employment for social integration and desistance from crime after imprisonment. Off-the-books employment should be included in discussion and research on these topics.

To conclude, these findings demonstrate the interconnection between employment, social integration and desistance, and how contingent desistance is on its social possibilities. This has been highlighted in recent desistance literature, suggesting that desistance from crime is dependent not only on individual change, but equally on transformations in societal structures and culture (Maruna, 2017; McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). Such a perspective on desistance highlights that the problems with achieving desistance and social integration should not be sought in personal attributes, but in the opportunities that society offers for such change. The narratives of inclusion, exclusion and liminality in labour market participation and social integration are not primarily a personal choice but echo how difficult it is to be included in society after having served a prison sentence.

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Data availability statement

The data analysed in this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants.

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