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**Steering clear of crime: The strategies used by probationers and parolees to  
reduce, resist, and replace reoffending risks**

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## **Abstract**

Many jurisdictions are currently experiencing the effects of “mass supervision”, managing record-breaking numbers of people on probation and parole orders. Despite large numbers of people supervised on community corrections, little is understood about how these individuals navigate their supervision and their efforts to refrain from reoffending. In this article we analyse interviews with 53 probationers and parolees about their experiences with community supervision and their desistance journeys. Using an informant-by-variable matrix, our findings demonstrate that these community-supervised correctional clients generally want to steer clear of crime opportunities. The participants described how they utilised individualised and targeted strategies to reduce, resist, and replace these reoffending risks, recruiting handlers to help facilitate or encourage the use of these strategies. These results showcase the utility of opportunity-reduction models of supervision, contributing to our understanding of the decision-making processes of individuals subject to community corrections orders.

**Keywords:** community corrections, probation and parole, crime opportunities, handlers, reoffending, desistance, Environmental Corrections

## Introduction

On any given day, a large number of individuals are subject to community supervision; this includes more than 4.5 million persons in the United States (Kaeble, 2018), more than 250,000 persons in the United Kingdom (Ministry of Justice, 2019), and approximately 80,000 individuals in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The flow-on effects of mass incarceration on parole populations (and diversionary sentencing trends on probation populations) have led to an era of “mass supervision” (Phelps, 2013). Despite the regularity with which individuals are sentenced to community corrections orders, we know surprisingly little about their experiences under supervision and efforts to avoid reoffending (McNeill, 2019; Williams & Schaefer, 2021). This is an unfortunate gap in the empirical evidence-base, as such research findings could be reverse-engineered to develop community corrections tactics to help reduce recidivism.

This article aims to address this gap by examining the experiences of probationers and parolees while on community supervision orders and the strategies they implement to manage their reoffending risks. We analyse data drawn from interviews with 53 community-supervised correctional clients about their experiences with probation and parole. These interviews formed part of an experimental trial of *Triple-S: Social Supports in Supervision*, an opportunity-reduction model of supervision that sought to incorporate the informal social controls of probationers and parolees (Schaefer, Moir, & Williams, 2019; Schaefer, Townsley, & Hutchins, in press). The findings of this study demonstrate that the participants generally want to steer clear of trouble while on supervision, utilising both generic and targeted strategies for reducing, resisting, and replacing reoffending risks. These results contribute to our understanding of (1) the experiences of probationers and parolees subject to supervision, (2) the efforts made by clients to go straight and the types of strategies used to limit risks of

reoffending, and (3) the utility of an opportunity-reduction orientation to probation and parole. Our review of the literature thus revolves around these key themes.

### **The Experiences of Probationers and Parolees Subject to Supervision**

There is somewhat limited research evidence on the experiences of individuals subject to probation and parole supervision (McNeill, 2019). Much of this research relates to the re-entry experiences of ex-prisoners (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005), the challenges in securing concrete needs while on supervision (such as employment, accommodation, and healthcare; Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Armstrong, 2010; Visher, Lattimore, Barrick, & Tueller, 2017; Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004), and perceptions held by correctional clients of their supervising officer (Chamberlain, Gricius, Wallace, Borjas, & Ware, 2018; DeLude, Mitchell, & Barber, 2012). Werth's ethnography with 24 parolees indicated that most "viewed themselves as committed to straightening themselves out" (2016, p. 151), although many saw the corrections agency as paternalistic and punitive. Williams and Schaefer (2021) likewise found that while many probationers and parolees expressed a desire to desist and their supervising officer was at times helpful in assisting them to identify and avoid criminogenic situations, supervision conditions were described as onerous and unnecessarily restrictive. The contributions of these studies notwithstanding, there is a lack of research on how probationers and parolees navigate their supervision conditions. Particularly for those correctional clients who report a desire to steer clear of trouble, we have little insight into the strategies employed by these individuals as they seek to sidestep settings that may prove tempting.

### **The Efforts Made by Community Correctional Clients to Go Straight**

The desistance literature provides many useful insights into the direct and incidental pathways of probationers and parolees that are trying to go straight. Researchers suggest that

desisting from crime is a unique, dynamic, and gradual process, facilitated through positive turning points (Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Kurlychek, Bushway, & Brame, 2012; Laub & Sampson, 2001). The introduction of particular life events can act as a “signal” that the desistance process is underway, but individuals have to see these events as opportunities for transformation (Bushway & Apel, 2012; Maruna, 2001, 2012). While some scholars suggest that there is a rational choice component to a desistance journey (Paternoster, Bachman, Bushway, Kerrison, & O’Connell, 2015), others argue that motivation is contextualised (and facilitated or inhibited) by situational or social-structural factors (Williams & Schaefer, 2021). There is some evidence that “desistance by default” can occur (Laub & Sampson, 2003), yet many researchers reason that individuals who choose to desist must deliberately shape their life in ways that support the choice to go straight (Paternoster et al., 2015; Williams & Schaefer, 2021). These choices surely involve decisions about how to avoid crime opportunities and resist the temptations of those opportunities (Berg & Cobbina, 2017; Schaefer, Cullen, & Eck, 2016). However, there is minimal empirical investigation into the experiences and methods community corrections clients use to alter their behaviour and routines to minimise their exposure to crime opportunities.

### **The Activities and Decision-Making Processes of Desisting Individuals**

Multiple theories within environmental criminology explain how crime opportunities arise and can tempt individuals into (re)offending. First, according to routine activity theory, crime occurs when a motivated offender meets a suitable target (or victim) when a capable guardian is not present (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Another crime controller includes handlers – individuals who often have a social or familiar relationship with an offender – who can influence and exert control over an individual and prevent them from committing an offence (Eck, 2003; Tillyer & Eck, 2011). Second, crime pattern theory asserts that offenders can find

promising crime opportunities through their daily travels to-and-from key locations (e.g. home, work, friends' houses) and that certain locations can generate, attract, or enable antisocial behaviour (Brantingham & Brantingham, 2008). Third, situations can precipitate criminal behaviour by prompting and triggering misbehaviour (Wortley, 2001), or provide easy crime opportunities with relatively low effort or risk (Cornish & Clarke, 1986).

Merging these theoretical perspectives together, it is evident that when individuals engage in certain routine activities, it can increase their exposure to crime opportunities (and thus their risks of offending and arrest; Drawve, Thomas, & Walker, 2014; McNeeley, 2015; Miller, 2012). Unstructured routine activities open opportunities for criminal conduct, especially when spent with antisocial peers in situations where informal social control measures such as guardians or handlers are absent (Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996; Svensson & Oberwittler, 2010). Further, Drawve, Caplan, and Ostermann (2019) found that parolees who lived in risky neighbourhoods with higher levels of potential crime locations were more likely to reoffend and be rearrested.

How probationers and parolees make decisions in risky environments also needs to be targeted, with the goal to make opportunities look less desirable when they arise (Schaefer et al., 2016). Probation and parole staff can be trained to develop clients' problem-solving skills, decision-making processes, and self-control capabilities to alter how crime opportunities are perceived and resisted (Robinson, VanBenschoten, Alexander, & Lowenkamp, 2011; Smith, Schweitzer, Labrecque, & Latessa, 2012). This can be achieved through incorporating cognitive-behavioural interventions (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), which have demonstrated success at reducing recidivism rates of those on probation or parole (Bonta et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2011). Overall, efforts to prevent reoffending should limit access to unstructured or risky activities, reduce exposure to criminogenic environments, and disrupt antisocial thought patterns (Cullen, Eck, & Lowenkamp, 2002; Schaefer et al., 2016).

## **The Utility of an Opportunity-Reduction Orientation to Probation and Parole**

There are practical applications that can be made from environmental criminology theories to community corrections practices. Yet traditionally, probation and parole case plans include standard lists of conditions and restrictions that do not directly target specific crime opportunities for individual supervisees (Schaefer & Brewer, 2022; Schaefer et al., 2016), focusing instead on bureaucratic forms of compliance (with accompanying threats for misbehaviour) and service brokerage (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Cullen, Jonson, & Mears, 2017; Schaefer, Cullen, & Manchak, 2018). Community corrections programs with a focus on deterrence through increased sanctioning or control are generally not effective and may lead to worse outcomes (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). As such, there is a movement to incorporate opportunity-reduction frameworks into supervision models of those on probation and parole (Miller, 2014; Schaefer et al., 2016; Schaefer et al., 2018; Schaefer & Little, 2020). Opportunity-reduction models focus on providing case plans that tailor supervision stipulations (requirements and restrictions) to offending opportunities that are unique to each individual client (Cullen et al., 2017). Studies within environmental criminology demonstrate how opportunity-reduction frameworks can successfully reduce a wide variety of crimes (see Felson & Clarke, 1998), however, these ideas have only recently been explored in community corrections practices (e.g. Miller et al., 2015; Schaefer & Williamson, 2017).

*Environmental Corrections* is a recent development which seeks to increase the efficacy of community supervision of probationers and parolees through opportunity-reduction supervision (Schaefer et al., 2016). This framework applies concepts from environmental criminology to community corrections “to reduce the extent to which offenders are tempted by and come into contact with opportunities for crime” while on probation or parole (Cullen et al., 2002, p. 31). Community corrections staff deliver brief interventions (Andrews & Bonta, 2010;

Bonta et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012) with their supervisees to help them build cognitive skills in “opportunity reduction” (i.e. identifying risky people, places, and precipitators and avoiding them) and “opportunity resistance” (i.e. withstanding the temptation to reoffend when presented with a conducive crime opportunity). These approaches differ from traditional probation and parole techniques by focusing on the *specific* environmental inducements of each individual’s offending rather than applying broad-brushed deterrence principles to all probationers and parolees (Schaefer et al., 2016). As many individuals are rearrested after they have successfully completed their supervision order (Ostermann, Miller, & Matejkowski, 2013), the goal of this framework is to promote long-term behavioural change beyond the expiry of a correctional order (Lovins, Cullen, Latessa, & Lero-Johnson, 2018; Schaefer et al., 2016; Taxman, 2008).

One specific model using the *Environmental Corrections* framework is *Triple-S: Social Supports in Supervision* (Schaefer et al., 2019; Schaefer et al., in press). The *Triple-S* model focuses on altering both criminal opportunity and propensity by training Probation and Parole Officers to understand the role opportunity plays in a client’s offending. The model aids them to work with individuals on their caseload to reduce access to crime risks, change how their clients perceive opportunities, restructure daily lives with prosocial routines, and engage clients’ handlers to expand supervision and control (i.e. handlers<sup>1</sup>) to expand surveillance and encourage compliance (Schaefer et al., 2016; Schaefer & Little, 2020; Schaefer et al., in press). Recent evaluations of *Environmental Corrections* show promise in reducing reoffending, with a quasi-experimental analysis demonstrating a reduction in recidivism of 28% (Schaefer & Little, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> This term is used in environmental criminology, which served as the theoretical underpinning for the *Triple-S* trial. Accordingly, we have opted to retain the use of this term here, emphasizing the application of crime prevention theories to community corrections practices. Readers should note, however, that staff did not use this term with the clients or their social supports.

The current study builds on the growing field of opportunity-reduction supervision practices in community corrections. Research in this area has focused on the experiences and types of opportunity-reduction strategies employed by probation and parole staff (Jiang, Lambert, Zhang, & Jin, 2019; Miller, 2014; Miller et al., 2015; Miller, Copeland, & Sullivan, 2014; Schaefer & Williamson, 2017). More recent work has examined how handlers of probationers and parolees help keep their loved ones out of trouble (Schaefer et al., 2019) and has begun to focus on clients' self-reported experiences in utilising desistance and avoidance strategies (Williams & Schaefer, 2021). This study builds on this prior research by examining the experiences of community correctional clients on supervision and focusing on the types of strategies used by probationers and parolees to reduce, resist, and replace reoffending risks. We analyse qualitative results from interviews with 53 people currently under supervision orders from one Probation and Parole Office in a large metropolitan area in Australia.

## **Method**

The current research forms part of a larger trial of the *Triple-S: Social Supports in Supervision* framework undertaken at a Probation and Parole Office in a large metropolitan area in Australia (Schaefer et al., in press). *Triple-S* is underpinned by the *Environmental Corrections* model to implement supervision conditions and educate community-supervised correctional clients about avoiding and resisting (re)offending opportunities (Schaefer et al., 2016). The trial occurred for six months in 2018. While Probation and Parole Officers received training workshops and materials to aid their implementation of the framework (for more information about this pilot test, see Schaefer et al., in press), the clients routinely supervised at this office were not explicitly advised of the change in practice. Interviews were conducted with a sample of clients ( $n = 53$ ) on probation or parole orders at this office to understand their experiences on community supervision, and the strategies they used to avoid crime

opportunities and prevent themselves from reoffending. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 2018/806).

## **Procedure**

The research team attended the Probation and Parole Office where the *Triple-S* trial was undertaken for two weeks for data collection. A convenience sample of clients was gathered through two methods: (1) a probationer or parolee's supervising Officer would extend an invitation to participate at the end of their supervision meeting and (2) flyers about the research study were available at the front-desk check-in. If the client expressed interest in participating, a member of the research team met with them in a private interview room. The researcher explained the purpose of the study in greater depth and obtained informed consent. Each participant was provided with an identification number to protect their anonymity (replaced with pseudonyms here). To reduce the possibility of bias, all interviews were conducted by two researchers independent of the *Triple-S* model (i.e. they were not involved in the development or implementation of the model and had no previous knowledge or interactions with the participants interviewed). On completion of the interview, participants received a debrief with the researcher and were provided information about additional support agencies and resources. Participants were provided with a \$20 grocery voucher in appreciation for their time. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

## **Participants**

Fifty-three probationers and parolees were interviewed as part of the current study out of the 218 clients who reported to the office across the two-week data collection period (24% acceptance rate). Most participants were male ( $n = 43$ , 81%) and Caucasian ( $n = 41$ , 77%). Nine participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (17%), while the remaining

three participants identified as Māori, Fijian, and Papau New Guinean. Ages ranged from 18 to 67 with an average age of 34.1 years ( $SD = 11.1$ ). The orders resulted from property offences ( $n = 19, 36\%$ ), violent offences ( $n = 13, 25\%$ ), justice offences (e.g. breaching a Domestic Violence Order;  $n = 8, 15\%$ ), traffic offences ( $n = 5, 9\%$ ), drug offences ( $n = 4, 8\%$ ), and sex offences ( $n = 4, 8\%$ ). Probation was the most common order type ( $n = 22, 42\%$ ), followed by court-ordered parole (COP;  $n = 21, 40\%$ ), board-ordered parole (BOP;  $n = 6, 11\%$ ), and intensive correction (probation) orders (ICO;  $n = 4, 8\%$ ). Clients' level of service (which informs supervision intensity) is determined by the agency's standardised instrument for risk of reoffending; our participants were categorised as standard ( $n = 9, 17\%$ ), enhanced ( $n = 36, 68\%$ ), and intensive ( $n = 7, 13\%$ ) levels of service, which equates to monthly, fortnightly, and weekly reporting, respectively. Order lengths ranged from 3 months to 8 years, with an average length of 18 months ( $SD = 19$  months). Approximately one-third ( $n = 18, 34\%$ ) of clients were on their first order ( $M = 3.3, SD = 2.6, R = 1-15$ ). Clients were in various stages of completing their supervision order, and on average, participants had served approximately half (48%) of their order ( $SD = 32\%$ ), with time served ranging from <1% (a client was on the first week of their order) to 100% (a client was on the last day of their order).

It is important to note that our interview respondents represent a diverse cross-sectional sample that includes rich variation in experiences and outcomes. Although all of our participants were active on their orders at the time of their interview, many disclosed that they were experiencing challenges on their order (e.g. technical violations, friction with their supervising Officer, difficult supervision conditions, reoffences that had not resulted in order revocation). As such, our sample is comprised of variable perspectives that represent varying degrees of "success" while on supervision. To communicate some of this rich context, in presenting interview excerpts, we accompany each quote with brief descriptive information about the participant, their offence, and/or their order.

## **Materials**

Data used in the current study were collected from semi-structured interviews where participants were asked about their correctional history, expectations of Probation and Parole, experiences on their current order, what they had been doing in case management meetings, support people in their life, day-to-day life on supervision, and plans to stay out of trouble in the future. Probing questions were also used in the interview around whether they had been avoiding people or situations, how they now manage risky situations, what help their support person offers them, and what has gotten them into trouble in the past.

## **Analyses**

Interview data from the 53 participants were analysed through the creation of an informant-by-variable matrix (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This type of matrix was used as each participant can be viewed individually, while also exploring relationships between themes and similarities/differences across participants. As the current study sought to understand how opportunity-reduction supervision strategies were implemented by correctional clients, a deductive approach to data analysis was selected by the research team. First, data reduction was undertaken through coding transcripts in NVivo. Coding was largely deductive in process, using a-priori codes based on research aims and theoretical frameworks. However, the coding process was iterative and open to allow additional and emergent codes to be added throughout the analytical process (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Codes were aggregated into eight dominant themes: (a) handler/guardian, (b) opportunity identification, (c) opportunity reduction, (d) opportunity resistance, (e) prosocial activities, (f) activity and lifestyle structure, (g) adjustment difficulties, and (h) limitations of supervision. Second, this coded data was displayed in an informant-by-variable matrix in which rows represent a

participant (i.e. informant) and columns represent the eight themes (i.e. variables). The content of the matrix followed Miles and colleagues' (2014) '10 rules of thumb' and included blocks of text for context, direct participant quotes, and researcher interpretations. Third, conclusion drawing and verification was completed using the guidelines of noting themes, counting patterns, exploring similarities and differences between participants, identifying contradictory or missing evidence, and re-checking preliminary conclusions by going back to the raw transcripts (Miles et al., 2014). The analyses were conducted by a researcher independent of the *Triple-S* model who was not involved in the development of the framework, the training of staff or the implementation of the trial, or the formal evaluation of the model. Methods to increase reliability of the data analysis included the creation of a coding manual with clear operational definitions for each code (Miles et al., 2020), and intra-rater coding consistency was tested over time by recoding a sub-sample of interviews by the same coder across a two-month period. Results that emerged from this analytical process are outlined in the next section.

## **Results**

Interviews were conducted with 53 probationers and parolees as part of a pilot study of *Triple-S: Social Supports in Supervision*, which applies opportunity-reduction strategies to community correctional clients. We explore the strategies described by participants that relate to their desire to prevent reoffending. Five main themes emerged: (1) risk identification, (2) risk reduction, (3) risk resistance, (4) risk replacement, and (5) utilising handlers. We further describe some of the difficulties probationers and parolees noted about the use of these strategies.

### **Risk Identification**

Before probationers and parolees could implement strategies to reduce reoffending, they first had to understand why or how they got into trouble. This involved working with their Officer in supervision meetings to identify opportunities which led to their offences (and that could potentially be reoffending risks). Nearly all participants ( $n = 48$ ) were able to articulate these offending risks. Substance (ab)use ( $n = 31$ ), poor decision-making and emotional control ( $n = 21$ ), and antisocial peers ( $n = 17$ ) were the most common reasons identified. Clients described how their supervising officer helped them to uncover, “What led to offending behaviour, the type of people, the environment and what I needed to do to not reoffend again” (Betty; 1<sup>st</sup> order for violent offence). Officers could then build targeted strategies to reduce and block known opportunities and improve decision-making when potential risks emerged for individual clients. Jack had an extensive correctional history and was on his ninth order at the time of the interview. He explained how, “I know what I have to watch out for, to stay clear of.” Gabrielle was almost three-quarters of the way through her second supervision order and explained her Officer “puts down a bad situation and strategies around, if I was in that position, what would I do different than what I did last time and then got in trouble.” The following subsections outline the specific types of strategies probationers and parolees used to reduce, resist, and replace these identified crime opportunities that presented risks for reoffending.

### **Risk Reduction Strategies**

Risk reduction was most commonly discussed with 47 (89%) participants explicitly identifying the use of at least one strategy to reduce risks of reoffending. Ten types of risk reduction strategies were identified; these are graphically displayed in Figure 1. Cutting off or reducing contact with certain people was the most common risk reduction strategy, mentioned by 37 participants (70%). These participants recognised the importance of minimizing contact with anti-social peers (particularly active drug users) to stay away from

crime opportunities. For instance, while on her first order for property offences, Leah concluded that, “Yeah, I avoid anyone who is using drugs, so yeah, I just won't go anywhere near it because I know it's too easy to cave in”, while Ollie (who was interviewed during his probation order for drug offences) reported how “I've pretty much cut everyone out of my life again, and that's the only way I seem to be able to do well is to change my circle.” Twenty-one (41%) participants also spoke about stopping or modifying alcohol and drug use because (a) not being intoxicated helped impulse control and decision-making (e.g. “It's easy to think about the right things when you're not on drugs and your mind's not blown.” – Fabian, court-ordered parole for armed robbery), and (b) it was a catalyst for previous offending. For example, Gary, who was approximately two-thirds through his fifteenth supervision order, explained, “The only time I got in trouble with the police was when I was using alcohol. So, I don't drink alcohol at all anymore.”



**Figure 1. Strategies used by probationers and parolees to reduce risky opportunities for crime**

Several interviewees also spoke about avoiding particular places ( $n = 13, 25\%$ ) because (a) they were perceived as risky and provided opportunities for crime (e.g. “I can

110% guarantee that I would be back in trouble...I know that for a certain fact, and that's why I won't go there.” – Mary, intensive correctional order for burglary), or (b) people they did not want to see would go there (e.g. “I don't hang out in those places where they are, houses, clubs or where they go.” – Steve, second time on community supervision.’ ).

Potentially risky situations were also avoided to reduce chances for trouble ( $n = 11$ , 21%).

For example, Rick, who was on probation for driving under the influence, reported that he avoided situations where lots of alcohol would be around, “Just really try not to put myself in those situations like say work parties or mates’ parties, bucks’ nights.” Some participants took this to great lengths and stayed home as a catch-all to reduce risks, such as Bill (currently on his fifth supervision order for weapons offences) reporting that “I don’t go anywhere, I don’t do anything. Just stay home.” Somewhat surprisingly, only one participant explicitly identified that certain times created potential risks, so they structured their day around reducing those temporal-related temptations. While on his first correctional order for child pornography offences, Nate reflected how, “It's just so much simpler to avoid those times of day on the buses, on the public transport, shopping.”

On the more extreme end, 10 participants (19%) explained they had moved to a new house or area to reduce offending risks. Moving seemingly overlapped with other risk reduction strategies including avoiding certain people (e.g. “That's why I moved up this way. I don't know anyone up here, so it's a new slate.” – Lydia, on probation for the first time for possession of weapons) and stressful situations (e.g. “I'm out of that toxic joint.” – Oscar, fourth order for property offences). Less commonly identified risk reduction strategies included (a) controlling triggers, such as Harry who advised while on his first intensive correctional order, “I'm not carrying a gun these days, so the chances aren't as high as they used to be”, or (b) the use of equipment, like Hugo who had a history of drink driving

disclosing that, “A risk was drinking too much and driving a car. But now I've got to have a breathalyser in my car, so it's going to be a big help.”

### **Risk Resistance Strategies**

Risk resistance strategies were utilised by 72% of the sample ( $n = 38$ ) to manage behaviour when participants encountered environments that posed tempting opportunities for crime. Eight types of resistance strategies were identified (presented in Figure 2) with the most frequently discussed tactics revolving around self-control ( $n = 16$ ) and problem-solving ( $n = 15$ ). Many participants spoke about self-control and how they had successfully removed themselves from a situation to resist opportunities for offending. For instance, while on court-ordered parole for assault, Jack reflected how “I’ve had a couple of other people wanting to fight last week, and I just walked away as fast as I could”, while Wade (who had a history of drug and violent offences and was determined by his supervising officer to be at a high risk of reoffending), communicated that “I get offered drugs on a daily basis, like I just offered crack just before and I back it down.” Participants spoke about how problem-solving strategies stemmed from thinking before acting (e.g. “So I have this one thing I never used to do. I used to act and think. So yeah, now I actually think before I act.” – Diego, classified as a high risk for re-offending and was on parole for burglary), particularly around consequences of such actions (e.g. “Making bad decisions has consequence and those consequences leads you into trouble.” – George, first order for property damage). The ability to find alternative methods of dealing with situations was another important problem-solving strategy to resist risk, such as in Oscar’s (fourth order on probation) summary of how he’s “learnt to deal with things a bit differently.”



**Figure 2. Strategies used by probationers and parolees to resist risky opportunities for crime**

Emotion regulation was discussed by 12 participants as resistance strategies. These strategies involved (a) trying to calm themselves (seen in Sophie’s strategy while on an enhanced probation order of “Breathing or something, yeah. Just try and stay calm, which is pretty good. It works. I haven’t got into trouble yet, which is a bonus.”), (b) cognitive reappraisal (reflected in Mark’s summary of how while on his eighth order I used to have troubles with anger, not anymore...if I found myself thinking any bad thoughts I’ll try and switch my head onto something that’s really happy with my life or something that’s really going good.”), or (c) redirecting behaviour (seen in Elijah’s strategy to resist a re-breach of a Domestic Violence Order was to “Go for a walk. I go out and do the gardening. It’s been my release for the last probably year.”). As one participant explained, managing emotions helped their ability to problem-solve; Steve reported how during his probation order he learnt that, “If I’ve got a problem or something like that and before I start stressing or anything like that, then I’ll take a deep breath in and break it down and just do it bit by bit.”

Addressing criminogenic thinking was mentioned by 10 participants. These resistance strategies revolved around (a) identifying and altering distortions around crime risks (e.g. “Not think that everything’s always going to not fall back on me and I can get away with everything.” – Tim, fourth supervision order, court-ordered parole for burglary), (b) restructuring thought patterns (e.g. “So you just change your thinking, your thinking changes your actions, and that changes your life.” – Charles, on parole for sexual offences) and (c) shaping prosocial attitudes (e.g. “That’s the biggest thing that I’ve noticed because my whole attitude’s changed...so that’s been the biggest thing is being on parole makes you be a little bit better in yourself.” – Everett, currently on his sixth supervision order). Other participants modified interactions with friends, such as Abe’s (serving first order for an assault) strategy to “just go and spend time there for an hour, then just go home before they go out – they drink a lot and stuff.”. Mark was another client with an extensive criminal history who at the time of interview was on court-ordered parole for property offences. Mark reported how he used drug replacement therapy to manage his addiction, whereby his medication “creates less thought about drugs.” Some participants recognised they could best resist crime opportunities by verbalising their thoughts, such as Adam who was on probation for drug offences (his fourth supervision order) and expressed that when he finds himself in a risky situation, he needs to “talk it out” to make sure his choices reflect his goals.

### **Risk Replacement Strategies**

Over one-quarter ( $n = 14$ ) of participants explicitly discussed how they had restructured daily routines while under community supervision. Mary was on community supervision for the first time under an ICO for burglary. In the interview, she reflected:

“My day-to-day life prior to the order was pretty much just sit around, smoke bongas all day, didn’t really do much. Whereas now it’s a lot more active...I’ll get out and

I'll take the girls down to the beach almost every day, or the park, things like that. Me and my sister have barbeques.”

Altering daily routines meant participants could replace criminogenic situations with opportunities for prosocial behaviours. Gary was approximately two-thirds of the way through his COP order and reported that, “Instead of going to the pub every afternoon, I take my dog for a walk or I'm out in the garden or whatever. I just don't get into trouble because I don't drink anymore.” Several other participants ( $n = 26$ , 49%) talked about participating in regular prosocial activities including developing hobbies, working toward a goal, or attending community events. Being involved in such activities was used as a strategy to (a) replace antisocial activities (e.g. “That's replacing what the drugs were giving me, the excitement of camping or fishing.” – Mark, interviewed the day after being released from prison), (b) give them something positive to do (e.g. “I've sprayed a few cars since being out.<sup>2</sup> So it gave me something to do when I was out.” – Diego, currently serving his third supervision order), (c) develop positive support systems (e.g. “The Breakfast Club's [a local community group] helped me with a lot of support and things like that.” – Frank, history of sexual and drug offences), and (d) improve emotional and mental health, which was recognised as a trigger for offending for many participants (e.g. “I exercise daily because that's part of – it makes you feel good.” – Steve, reporting weekly for breaching a Domestic Violence Order).

Employment was acknowledged by nine participants (17%) as having a positive influence in their life as it meant they did not have the time to behave inappropriately. Brody had been in prison several times and was on court-ordered parole at the time of interview, but reported how he's now “been working every day. I start at 5:00[am] and finish at 6:00[pm] so I don't really get time to do anything.” Working introduced clients to positive influences who

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<sup>2</sup> This participant was referring to professional painting of cars, not spray-painting as a form of vandalism.

could encourage prosocial lifestyles. For instance, Oscar, who was reporting to his supervision officer fortnightly, concluded that by “Going to work you can discuss things about normality, family, what you get up to at the weekend...For me working's the only thing that keeps me driving. You get the hang of normal people.” Further, approximately one-third of participants ( $n = 17$ ) recognised the dangers of having too much unstructured time. While on court-ordered parole for dangerous driving, Connor explained that having a daily routine helped him to replace crime opportunities:

“It’s just better knowing what you’re doing than not knowing what you’re doing because if you get up in the morning and don’t know what you’re doing then you could go astray and be over with the idiot. Whereas if you’re in a routine, you don’t let anybody get into that routine then you can’t get yourself into trouble.”

### **Utilising Handlers to Reduce, Resist, and Replace Reoffending Risks**

Fifteen (28%) participants purposefully utilised their handlers to help themselves reduce, resist, and replace crime opportunities. The most common strategy ( $n = 14$ ) was for participants to talk to their handler when they felt they were at risk of doing unlawful. For example, Elijah, who was on his fifth supervision order, indicated that, “If I ever have a problem or issue I go to them. Mum, she just knows me. She can calm me down instantly if I’m upset.” The second strategy involved organising prosocial activities with handlers to avoid risky situations. While on his probation for the first time for child pornography offences, Isaiah, for instance, often contacted friends to avoid isolation (an identified risk factor for his offending):

“I’ve messaged a few friends just to see what they were doing. So we’d all meet up somewhere and plan to do something or try and find something to do...Just something to get our mind off it and a safe place so that we can even talk as well.”

The third strategy which emerged was participants utilising their handlers to help control drug and alcohol use. Everett explained that problematic drinking was a catalyst for his offending, but now on probation for breaching a Domestic Violence Order, he no longer went out drinking by himself, reporting that, “Even if I go to the hotel now, my partner takes me and I stick to a limit, then she drives me home.” Finally, participants also spoke about using their handlers explicitly and implicitly for help in risky situations. For example, after being released from custody, Betty discussed how she overtly relied on her handler’s help out of a bad situation (“I rang my mum last weekend, I said, like ‘I’m using really heavily and I’m in a really bad place and I’m really concerned about what I’m going to do for myself’ and my mum flew me home.”), while Nick, who was deemed a high-risk of reoffending and had previously breached bail, explained he thought of his handler when making decisions (“I think he’s just that little whisper in the ear from here or from afar.”).

While many participants discussed how their handlers helped them reduce, resist, and replace crime opportunities, four participants (8%) did not have support people in their life and they recognised this made their ability to stay out of trouble difficult. For instance, Pete, who was on court-ordered probation for burglary, reported that he did not have social supports (who could serve as handlers), explaining, “That’s where it’s sort of hard for me. That’s sort of the reason why I’ve never really finished an order.”

### **Difficulties in Using Risk Reduction, Resistance, and Replacement Strategies**

While the results demonstrate that probationers and parolees can implement risk reduction and resistance strategies and work to replace antisocial activities, difficulties around these processes were raised by several participants. First, to many probationers and parolees, ideas around risk reduction and resistance were new, so further exposure and repetition may be required for successful implementation. As Gary (who was serving his 15<sup>th</sup>

correctional order) explained, he had never had an Officer incorporate decision-making before the *Triple-S* trial started: “Well, this morning, for instance, [Officer] asked me ‘have I had any problems in the last two weeks where I thought I could've made a better decision’ type thing. I've never experienced that before from a parole officer.” Further, some participants seemingly had difficulty and needed further support in developing effective resistance strategies. For instance, Max, who was on his fifth order for violent offences and was classified as high-risk, reported, “At the moment I don’t know what the better choices are because I’ve never been taught. But maybe if someone can teach me, it’d be quite handy to have. Some tools for my arsenal.” Similarly, Rick who was on a standard level of supervision for traffic offences, described how, “Everywhere you go, every party, every function, everything just resolves around alcohol. So I’m just trying to stay out of those things until I’m strong enough to say no and mean it.”

Second, some of the strategies implemented by participants were not a deliberate choice made, but rather, conditions they adhered to as part of their correctional order (e.g. “Because I'm on an order. I don't have a choice, have I?” – Bill, probation). Third, adjusting to a prosocial lifestyle was mentioned by approximately one-third of participants ( $n = 17$ , 32%). It was particularly difficult for those recently released from prison (seen in Kevin’s reflection of how, “When I first got out, the first time I was incarcerated, I was like ‘what do I do?’ I had no idea, I was lost within myself and with what I could do with my time.”), or adjusting to living a drug-free life (observed in Will’s summary during his fourth order that “it’s not the fact I’m just giving up ice. I’m giving up my whole lifestyle that I know.”). Fourth, some did not always use appropriate methods to reduce and resist crime opportunities. Max had a history of assault offences and explained how he threatened to harm previous gang associates who would not leave him alone: “I told dad and my pops and all that if I’ve got to shoot youse, I will. If I’ve got to kill youse, I will.” Finally, cynicism around the

Probation and Parole department and Officers were discussed, with several participants expressing that individual agency and motivation was seemingly the most important factor in stopping offending. Connor, for instance, concluded that “It really doesn’t matter what your Probation Officer and that tell you. If you’re going to do something, you’re going to do it. Until that person’s ready to change their life, they’re not really going to change.”

## Discussion

Compared to traditional models of probation and parole that emphasise generic deterrence principles and service brokerage, emerging models of opportunity-reduction supervision apply tenets of environmental criminology to community corrections practices (Cullen et al., 2002; Miller, 2012, 2014; Miller et al., 2014, 2015; Schaefer et al., 2018). Following a trial of one of these frameworks (*Triple-S: Social Supports in Supervision*; Schaefer et al., 2019; Schaefer et al., in press), data collected from 53 interviews enabled us to explore the specific strategies community correction clients used to reduce, resist, and replace crime opportunities. Under the *Triple-S* framework, Probation and Parole Officers worked with clients to identify and decrease opportunities for future offending by identifying triggers, developing skills for avoiding and withstanding those risks, involving supports from the clients’ social networks, and replacing antisocial activities and routines (see Schaefer et al., in press). These strategies were not mutually exclusive; for many participants, there were overlaps in how and when they utilised such strategies. This is perhaps best exemplified in Jack’s account of how he used reduction and resistance strategies, surrounded himself with positive supports, and participated in prosocial activities as methods to stay out of trouble:

“Well I’m managing it by I’m trying to get work, I’m staying occupied. I’m not drinking as much, I’m not doing drugs as much. I’ve got my girlfriend to side-track

me and support me. My sister and my mum. I'm not hanging around the crowd, the bad influences. I'm walking away, like I've got a strategy to walk away from a fight if it's going to arise."

Our results also illuminate the interrelationships between strategies, prosocial activities, and handlers. First, clients could actively develop and participate in prosocial activities and routines as a deliberate strategy to replace antisocial activities, or risk reduction could occur passively as clients had filled their days with productive things to do, limiting unstructured time in which to get into trouble (Osgood et al., 1996). Second, participants could get involved in prosocial activities to distract themselves and resist criminal temptations. Third, participating in these activities could introduce clients to prosocial peers who could influence positive behaviour (Miller et al., 2014; Schaefer et al., 2019). Over time, by making prosocial activities a habit and associating with positive handlers, normative compliance (Schaefer et al., 2016) was seen in participants wherein they seemingly enjoyed what Brody referred to as the "straight 180 lifestyle." Learning how to develop prosocial lifestyles means that longer-term desistance can be promoted so community corrections clients can refrain from offending beyond their correctional order (Taxman, 2008), as illustrated by Nick. Nick has served approximately 20% of his community corrections order and reflected on how this experience was going to help him in the future:

"Where now it's more again with the whole goals and what I'm doing with life and it's a bit more proactive in trying to help me rather than just like 'oh you're staying out of trouble, good, go away.' I think it's helpful. It's actually keeping a lot more up to date with who I am and what I'm doing with life rather than me just staying out of trouble."

Finally, interviewing clients who had various index offences, different types of correctional orders, and were at differing stages of completion allowed us to examine whether

there were apparent differences in how clients responded to the *Triple-S* framework. Our qualitative results did not reveal any meaningful differences in strategies used in offending groups (i.e. clients on orders for drug offences, violent offences, property offences, early in their order, almost completed their order, etc.). The majority of our interview respondents were able to articulate risks associated with offending and develop and implement strategies to steer clear of such risks; our analyses did not uncover many significant patterns in the use of these strategies amongst varying offender, offence, or order types. Interpreted optimistically, this may indicate that opportunity-reduction based supervision shows promise for the diversity of clients that probation and parole staff supervise in the community. Perhaps the most apparent difference between offending groups that emerged in our interviews related to perceptions and cynicism of probation and parole practices. Thirteen participants who had a history of violence (e.g. assault, Domestic Violence Orders) expressed some level of pessimism around their supervising Officer's ability to facilitate prosocial change. This dismissal may be best expressed in the words of Max who was interviewed while on his fifth supervision order and stated, "I think parole's a load of shit. I think it doesn't work." As suggested by the risk-need-responsivity framework (Andrews & Bonta, 2010) and as reported by Schaefer and Little (2020), those with extensive criminal/correctional histories and entrenched criminogenic needs may require more intensive interventions, perhaps in the case of opportunity-reduction just as much as with propensity-reduction.

### **Limitations**

Although there are many contributions of the current study, limitations of the research must be acknowledged. First, as participation relied on volunteers, and we were not able to interview correctional clients who were unsuccessful or who had already completed their correctional order, it is possible that results are subject to selection bias and skewed toward

participants who were motivated in completing their order or who had positive experiences with the *Triple-S* trial. Second, while our participants ranged in age, offence types, gender, and ethnicity, the sampling strategy was a mix of convenience and purposive sampling at one Probation and Parole Office and we therefore cannot make any firm conclusions as to the generalizability of these findings. Although this is often not the goal of qualitative investigations, it is important to note that results may differ with other participant cohorts. Third, due to funding constraints and to alleviate the potential for bias, there was one coder for analysis. While attempts to check consistency and ensure reliability were made, the use of a single coder has inherent limitations. Fourth, while previous studies have demonstrated the efficacy of *Environmental Corrections* on reducing recidivism of probationers and parolees (Schaefer & Little, 2020), we have not explored the success of these strategies with the current sample in this paper (for a summary of the quantitative evaluation of *Triple-S*, see Schaefer et al., in press). The *Triple-S* trial trained Probation and Parole Officers in how to proactively build cognitive skills of opportunity resistance in their clients, and some of our interview participants seemed to indicate that this recent change in practice was responsible for their updated thinking. It is important to note, however, that probationers and parolees may independently adopt these strategies without the guidance of their Probation and Parole Officer or the influence of the *Triple-S* trial as part of an overarching “cognitive commitment to change” or the broader “knifing off” observed in ethnographies of desisters (Berg & Cobbina, 2017; Maruna, 2001). Overall, based on our findings and in light of these limitations, we encourage future empirical explorations of the lived experiences of individuals navigating the desistance process while under community correctional supervision.

## **Implications**

The insights that have emerged from the current study provide potentially pivotal insights into how community corrections practices may be improved. Perhaps most centrally, our participants readily communicated the role of crime opportunities in facilitating their previous offending and current reoffending risks. Accordingly, they articulated quite clear tactics for reducing, resisting, and replacing these risks. Some strategies were indirect and incidental, while others were quite personalised and purposively geared toward desistance efforts. It was evident in the interviews that our probationers and parolees considered how crime opportunities (and the ecological landscapes that house them) influence(d) their behavioural trajectories. This may have been the result of the *Triple-S* trial (which is an opportunity-reduction framework), an inherent component to desistance journeys, or some combination thereof. In any event, our findings highlight the relevance of opportunity risks for individuals on community supervision, and thus the practical utility of addressing these in order conditions and interventions. Probation and parole authorities may then find it useful to (1) systematically assess each offender's opportunity-related risks, (2) develop case plan conditions that (a) steer clients away from these risks and (b) expose them to prosocial settings, and (3) perform brief interventions in routine supervision meetings that help clients to build skills in resisting any remaining crime opportunities that prove tempting.

Contemporary community corrections practices must move beyond an overemphasis on propensity (which can be deeply rooted and difficult to change from the perspective of the supervising officer) or generic deterrence principles (which are often mis-specified and of questionable effectiveness). Rather, probation and parole supervision may be improved through the systematic integration of opportunity-reduction practices (Cullen et al., 2002), such as case plan conditions that are relevant to each individual's actual risks for reoffending and brief interventions that build cognitive skills in avoiding and withstanding those risks (Schaefer et al., 2016). This is not to say that no such practices exist; there are certainly

useful frameworks for achieving these ends (e.g. EPICS (Smith et al., 2012), STICS (Bonta, Rugge, Bourgon, & Wanamaker, 2019), and STARR (Robinson et al., 2011)), and many community corrections departments integrate some degree of these models (e.g. RNR principles (Andrews & Bonta, 2010); core correctional practices (Dowden & Andrews, 2004)). However, while the evidence-base of these effective practices is growing, agencies have been slow to adopt overarching frameworks that organise their work, prioritize recidivism-reduction, and use the best available evidence about the causes and prevention of crime (Cullen et al., 2017), at least in systematic ways (Schaefer & Brewer, 2022). While further research is needed, the efforts outlined by the probationers and parolees in our sample are anticipated to help reshape routines and social networks so that long-lasting behaviour change (as opposed to temporary compliance) can be achieved. The results of this study provide some preliminary evidence around how community corrections clients navigate their relevant risks for reoffending while on their supervision orders, which we suggest will be of importance to penology and crime prevention scholars as well as probation and parole practitioners.

## **Conclusions**

The present study makes important contributions to the growing field of opportunity-reduction supervision practices in community corrections (Cullen et al., 2002; Miller, 2014; Miller et al., 2014, 2015; Schaefer & Little, 2020; Schaefer et al., 2019; Williams & Schaefer, 2021). While prior work has mostly focused on how probation and parole staff incorporate opportunity-reduction strategies into case management plans, this study focuses on the specific strategies used by the probationers and parolees themselves to steer clear of crime opportunities. Overall, our study demonstrates that an opportunity-reduction framework aids probationers and parolees in developing tactics to reduce, resist, and replace risks for reoffending. These results have important implications for community corrections practices,

suggesting that probation and parole agencies should consider supervision frameworks that proactively arm clients with strategies for steering clear of recidivism risks and cognitive skills that allow them to withstand opportunities for reoffending that remain.

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