

Parental Behavior and Juvenile Offending:
How Paternal and Maternal Behavior Influences Desistance

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Abstract

The family serves as the primary socializing institution and a key predictor for the involvement of deviant activities for youth. Social bonds between parent and child serve many purposes such as providing healthy attachment necessary to curb antisocial behaviors. Without bonds and feelings of love, deviant behaviors may ensue in children. Using a cross-sectional design, the current study examined the impact of parental behavior on the prediction of desistance from crime among serious juvenile offenders. Results indicated parental behavior is a predictor for desistance from crime. Implications for human and rehabilitation service professionals, research and scholarship are also discussed.

Keywords: Desistance, parental warmth, juveniles, rehabilitation, counselors

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Research has shown that there is an overrepresentation of juvenile offenders and that over 100,000 juvenile offenders who involve themselves in serious (e.g. homicides and drug offenses) and other offences are released each year from incarceration with the hope of successful reintegration (Lieber & Fix, 2019; Terry, 2012) into the general population. Of the thousands of juveniles being released each year, recent data supports that over 65% of juveniles have a disability (Davis, 2015). Serious juvenile offenders with disabilities are more likely to be repeat offenders and have their first encounter with the juvenile justice system at an earlier age (Zhang, Barrett, Katsiyannis, & Yoon, 2011).

To better understand the successful outcomes of serious juvenile offenders, research has turned its focus on the factors promoting the process of living a crime free life, which has been more specifically termed as desistance. This is a welcomed change from the predominantly studied recidivism, focusing on the negative aspects of re-incarceration. Despite no consensus on the definition of desistance in the literature, desistance is widely explained as the abandonment of crime and the cessation of criminal behavior as well as a sustained absence of criminal activity over time. Therefore, should not be perceived as a single event or occurrence. In addition, desistance has also been noted as one of the central dimensions of life-course criminality and is

also regarded as a criminal career parameter influenced by life events and personal choice (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Understanding desistance requires a comprehensive outlook as the discontinuation of criminal offending is a multifaceted process influenced by factors in the environment (e.g. parental behaviors). For juvenile offenders, the first important unit of socialization is the household, which makes it important to examine the social aspects of parental behavior and its impact on delinquent behavior for youth. Despite the increased attention of researchers on the process of desistance, there is little research examining the effects of parental behavior and desistance in human services research. In fact, serious juvenile offenders (those committing the most serious of offenses e.g., assault and murder) are hardly the focus of research. Instead, those associated with misdemeanors or committers of minor offenses are often the focus of criminal justice research. Serious juvenile offenders require specialized services to aid in the successful reintegration in all aspects of society. Too frequently, juvenile offenders and the family system are consumers of human services across the spectrum and as a result, research informing best practices are essential to provide quality sustainable services. For this reason, the purpose of this research is to identify the effects of parental behavior (warmth and hostility) on desistance for serious juvenile offenders to best inform human services practice and service provision for serious juvenile offenders and the family unit.

Literature Review

Life Course Perspective

For the current study, the life course perspective was adopted. This perspective was made prominent by Sampson and Laub (2003) who modeled elements from the social control theory to elaborate the importance of social factors in the role of desistance from crime. These researchers postulated the importance of turning points that occur in life that act as a hook for change for individuals that promote a pathway towards living a crime free life. Individuals take control of their chosen pathways by capitalizing on the resources and supports available to them (e.g. social and family supports) to influence their future trajectories. This theory considers the long-term effect of past occurrences (positive or negative) in individual's lives and it being influential over their lifetime. This theoretical framework explains the interconnectedness that is observed between an individual's social relationships (e.g. parental system) and the individual.

Desistance and Parental Warmth

Research has been dedicated not only towards risk factors of juvenile delinquency, but also protective influences. As an effort to indicate the importance of preventing and discontinuing lawbreaking, Singh and Kiran (2014) conducted research on the effects of child-specific crimes. Both researchers signified that two-parent households that ensure an observation for the equality of rights, justice, and condemnation of discrimination can greatly reduce the likelihood of children continuing serious crimes. In addition, it is beneficial for early childhood parents to ensure that their children meet individuals within their own age and recognize how other children behave in the society. Two-parent families are more able to display affection for one another; thus, they can pass that form of positive relationship to their children (Lippold, Fosco, Hussong & Ram, 2019; Zemp, Merrilees, & Bodenmann 2014). Another form of warmth that two-parent families can provide is freedom of expression. This creates a healthy and

welcoming relationship with children to ensure a feeling of being unrestricted to share possible concerns with their parents (Gong & Carono, 2019).

Maternal Specific Influences. A mother's warmth and its impact on the discontinuity of juvenile behavior has also been researched. Maternal warmth is perceived as a protective factor for juveniles as it culminated sociomoral tendencies in adolescents such as prosocial behaviors and moral conviction (Davis & Carlo, 2019). Cavanagh and Cauffman (2017) investigated how a mother's relationship with her child may change because of continued youth offending. Results indicated that the quality of the initial mother-child relationship plays an imperative role in youth self-reported re-offending trajectories. Further, maternal support is positively correlated with positive self-esteem among juveniles and as a result, decreased the probability of deviant engagement (Liu, Ksinan & Vazsonyi, 2018). These findings correlate with prior research which indicated positive parental support depicted in authoritative parental styles despite gender and cultural differences, was found advantageous for juvenile adjustment in all aspects of adolescent development (William & Steinberg, 2011) That is, with increased warmth and support a decrease in hostility and delinquent behaviors exist which is also reflective of adolescents' psychosocial maturity.

Paternal Specific Influences. Fathers directly influence their children by ensuring a positive relationship which helps to foster a safe environment, and better cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Kabi & Pereira, 2017; Simmons, Steinberg, Frick & Cauffman, 2018; Yoder, Brisson & Lopez, 2016). Research has predominantly focused on the absence of fathers and less on the quality of parental relationship where the negative impact is overly emphasized in the literature. However, the mere presence of fathers does not serve as a protective factor and may be more detrimental than father absenteeism (Simmons et al., 2018). Although the presence of a father is usually significant for economic and social reasons, available research has demonstrated that the quality of father involvement is more related to positive outcomes than is the extent of the involvement. In continuance, it should be known that adolescents who had a positive relationship with their fathers are less likely to be arrested, be involved with gang-related activity, destroy property, engage in theft, or run away compared to their children who have fewer encouraging relationships with their fathers (Bronte-Tinkew, 2006).

Factors that Compromise Parental Warmth

Lability. Parental warmth can occur in changes. To emphasize, lability is the extent to which a parent's warmth fluctuates between highs and lows of expressed positive emotions as well as control towards their children. As an example, children with parents high in lability experience many fluctuations of warmth; thus, may experience differences in how and the level to which warmth is expressed by parents over time. Conversely, individuals who have parents with low levels of lability have few fluctuations and are more likely to experience consistent parental warmth. Lippold, Hussong, Fosco, and Ram (2018) found an association with high leveled lability parents and the depletion in their child's feelings of acceptance while increasing their risk of substance use and delinquency. Also, it was discovered moderate levels of lability were associated with child crime activity as well as substance intake. Regarding gender differences, Lippold and colleagues found that girls appeared to be most affected by lability in parental warmth. Lability in youth-reported father warmth and youth-reported mother warmth were linked to greater delinquency for girls but not boys (Lippold et al., 2015). Overall, youth

and parents differed in their perceptions for fluctuations of warmth over time: youth reported increases in fathers' hostility while mothers and fathers reported declines in hostility.

Parental Negativity. Specifically, parental negativity focuses on the pressure or restraints that parents apply to modify their child's behavior and emotions (Pinquart, 2017). Research postulates that children who display behavioral difficulties (e.g. externalizing behaviors, juvenile crime, and aggression) are more likely to have parents who use punitive or demanding punishment (Pinquart, 2017; Simmons et al., 2018; Van Gelder, Averdijk, Ribeaud & Eisner, 2018). Conversely, other research supports that a parent's ability to balance adverse interactions with positivity can be a better predictor of beneficial relationships with children. More recently, Zemp, Merrilees, and Bodenmann (2014) studied the positive-to-negative ratio in parental interaction as a predictor of child externalizing negative behaviors. It was found that children whose parents were characterized by more negativity relative to positivity scored higher in externalizing problems compared to children whose parents' negativity was outbalanced by positive interactions.

Moreover, it was found that parental negativity may have fewer aversive effects on children when a positive functioning of family interaction occurs (Cummings & Davies, 2010). In continuance, parental violence is a contributing factor to the delinquency in adolescent individuals. In their seminal study, Voorhis, Cullen, Mathers, and Garner (1988) found that one-third of delinquent boys in their sample came from homes with spousal abuse. A child growing up witnessing violence may learn that spousal mistreatment is an effective method of maintaining power and achieving desired goals. A child in situations such as this may understand that the behavior in which these adults are partaking is wrong, but they often do not witness their abusers receiving any negative repercussions for their abusive actions. This may instill the mentality that it is acceptable to use violence, and the child may take part in activities that will have them labeled a juvenile delinquent. With this in mind, it should be known that the practice of parental warmth relative to negativity enhances the likelihood of children's prosocial functioning.

Methods

The aim of the current study was to investigate the impact of parental behavior on desistance from crime for serious juvenile offenders. As a result, this addresses gaps in human services research by examining the factors that are important in facilitating serious juvenile in living a crime free life. Using a cross-sectional design guided by the life course theoretical framework, this study looked at the following research questions:

1. What effect do parental behaviors (warmth and hostility) have on the desistance from crime?
2. Does type of offending (aggressive and income) have an effect on desistance outcomes for serious juvenile offenders?

Dataset and Collection

The Pathways to Desistance baseline data was used to conduct the current study. The Pathways data is publicly available through the Inter-University Consortium of Political and Social Research (ICPSR). In the Pathways study, data was collected through interviews and self-

reported information of criminal engagement from participants. Participants were selected if they met the age requirements and were adjudicated or found guilty in the juvenile or adult courts for serious offenses (e.g. felony level offenses, sexual assaults and weapons offenses) (Mulvey et al., 2004).

Participants

A total of 1,354 participants were included in the Pathways study and demographic information are demonstrated in Table 1. Participants included both male and female juveniles with ages ranged from 14 to 19 years with an average age of 16.5 years.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Identified Sample of Serious Juvenile Offenders (N= 1354)

	Ethnicity					
Gender	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	Total	
Male	225	493	398	54	1170	
Percentages	19.25%	42.1%	32%	4.6%	100%	
Female	49	68	56	11	184	
Percentages	26.6%	37%	30.4%	6%	100%	
Total	274	561	454	65	1354	

Measures

Self-Reported Offending. Desistance was measured using the Self-reported Offending Report (SRO) instrument (Huizinga, Esbensen, & Weiher, 1991). This is a 24 item which measures antisocial and illegal activities. The SRO provides information of the offending variety: aggressive (Have you ever killed someone?) and income offending (Have you ever been paid by someone for sex?). Desistance is measured as a dichotomous variable where no illegal activity is coded as 1 (indicating desistance) and 0 if engaged in illegal activities. The SRO provided good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80.

Parental Behavior. The Quality of Parental Relationships Inventory (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994) was used to assess parental behavior and more specifically, the parent-adolescent relationship. The 42 items inventory (21 to assess paternal and 21 maternal relationships) from the measure consisted of parental warmth and hostility of the mother and father (e.g. 'How often does your mother tell you she really cares about you?' and 'How often does your father throw things at you?'). Items are graded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "always" to "never". Cronbach's alphas for subscales yielded good results ranging from 0.85 to 0.95.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were included to provide demographic information among sample participants. Binary logistic regression models were created to compute the results of all research questions. The analysis was deemed appropriate due to its usefulness as a statistical technique when the response variable is binary in nature (Kleinbaum, Kupper, Nizam & Rosenberg, 2013). A p -value < 0.05 was used to determine significance.

Results

Results of the analyses are discussed in this section. As demonstrated in Table 2, the results of the Spearman's *rho* correlation indicated several significant relationships at the $p < .01$ level among several independent variables. More specifically, significant positive correlations were observed between maternal and paternal warmth as well as maternal and paternal hospitality (weak to moderate strength). A negative relationship of weak to moderate strength is observed between maternal warmth and hostility and paternal warmth and hostility. Weak relationships were observed between the variables maternal hostility and paternal warmth, and maternal warmth and paternal hostility (see Table 2).

Table 2
Summary of Intercorrelations of Parental Factors (N=1354)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Maternal Warmth	—	-.364**	.481**	-.235**
2. Maternal Hostility		—	-.212**	.365**
3. Paternal Warmth			—	-.300**
4. Paternal Hostility				—

Note: ** indicates significance at the 0.01 level ($p < .01$).

To answer research question one regarding the effects of parental behavior on desistance, results of the regression analyses indicated significance with the exception of paternal warmth on desistance from crime (see Table 3). More specifically, the odds of desistance increase as maternal warmth increases by 1.521 times and decrease with an increase in maternal and paternal hostility. Results of the analysis corroborates what is observed in criminology literature regarding increased parental warmth and negative parental behaviors on juvenile criminal behaviors.

Table 3
Regression Output of Parental Factors and Offending Variety

Predictors	b (SE)	Odds Ratio	95% CI	P-val
<i>Total Offending</i>				
Maternal Warmth	0.419 (0.155)	1.521	[1.122; 2.061]	0.007
Maternal Hostility	-0.918 (0.272)	0.399	[0.234; 0.680]	0.001
Paternal Warmth	0.211 (0.142)	1.236	[0.935; 1.633]	0.137
Paternal Hostility	-0.935 (0.329)	0.393	[0.206; 0.748]	0.004
<i>Income Offending</i>				
Maternal Warmth	0.301 (0.100)	1.352	[1.112; 1.643]	0.002
Maternal Hostility	-0.692 (0.168)	0.501	[0.360; 0.696]	0.000
Paternal Warmth	0.286 (0.094)	1.331	[1.107; 1.599]	0.002
Paternal Hostility	-0.493 (0.184)	0.611	[0.426; 0.876]	0.007

<i>Aggressive Offending</i>				
Maternal Warmth	0.251 (0.105)	1.285	[1.046; 1.578]	0.017
Maternal Hostility	-0.533 (0.173)	0.587	[0.418; 0.824]	0.002
Paternal Warmth	0.071 (0.099)	1.074	[0.884; 1.304]	0.472
Paternal Hostility	-0.591 (0.309)	0.568	[0.380; 0.849]	0.006

As it relates to research question two, type of offending (income and aggressive) does have an impact on desistance from crime for serious juvenile offenders. As indicated in Table 3, maternal and paternal warmth was found to increase the odds of desistance while hostility seeks to decrease the odds making desistance less likely as hostility increases. Similar to results obtained with total offending, paternal warmth was not significant in the desistance process of aggressive offending. All parental factors were found to be significant in the desistance process as it relates to income offending. Interestingly, results indicated that paternal warmth does increase the chances for juvenile offenders to live a crime free life as it relates to income offending. The odds of desistance increase by 1.331 times as warmth from a father figure increases (see Table 3).

Discussion

Desistance from crime has increasingly become the focus in helping offenders live a crime free life and to successfully reintegrate into society. A focus on positive factors contributing to being successful in society is a welcomed focus for professionals working with justice involved youth, rather than placing attention on the factors of reincarceration or recidivism. It is acknowledged that not all juvenile offenders continue into becoming adult offenders and do lead successful lives post criminal justice involvement (Farrall & Calverley, 2005). This research intended to address one aspect of the desistance process by focusing on the effects of parental behavior (warmth and hostility) on the process of desistance.

Social factors such as parental affection towards children and adolescents have indicated correlations to desistance from crime (Basto-Pereira et al., 2015). Adapting a life course perspective, due to positive bonds experienced and developed over time between parent and child has been found to be an effective deterrent from criminal engagement (Laub et al., 1998). As results indicated, parental warmth is a vital protective factor that supports juveniles in becoming a crime free citizen. Parents are still active participants in the lives of juveniles and play a role in shaping the behavior and responses to adversities that may arise in day to day social interactions for juveniles (Harris-McKoy & Cui, 2012). Findings obtained are similar to those in extant literature (Chen, Liu, & Li, 2000; Umlauf, Bolland, & Lian, 2011). This is even more important for ethnically marginalized youth living in poor socioeconomic conditions (Harris, 2016; Umlauf et al., 2011). This may be a large contributing factor for participants in the study because the participants enlisted in the Pathways study were from areas of high criminal involvement (Maricopa County, AZ and Philadelphia, PA) (Mulvey et al., 2004).

Parental involvement is undoubtedly important in the developmental process as well as desistance from crime. Positive parenting such as warmth and positive involvement has shown to

reduce the risk of adolescent maladjustment and low parental involvement is associated with increased delinquency (Farrington, 2011). This can be observed in the results obtained (see Table 3) as parental warmth (maternal and paternal) have shown to increase the chances of crime free involvement for juvenile offenders. However, as it relates to aggressive offending, paternal warmth resulted in no significance observed. One reason for this observation could be that the majority of participants were involved more heavily in income generating criminal activities (income offending) as opposed to aggressive offending activities. Furthermore, Yang and McLoyd (2015) postulate that boys are less susceptible to parental warmth influences in the home due to boys spending considerably more time away from home than girls. Under these circumstances, peer influence may be more impactful on boy's behavior and motivation for desistance. Another feasible explanation is that single parent households with the mother as primary caregiver may be a prevalent family structure for participants in the current sample. As a result, this may lead to low response rate for paternal warmth resulting in no significance observed as it relates to aggressive offending.

In contrast to parental warmth, hostility and negative parental practices serve as a risk factor into criminal offending for juvenile offenders. Those individuals exposed to harsh parenting practices, high levels of rejection and criticism are more likely to take a pathway of crime. Low parental warmth experienced in these circumstances lead to conduct behavioral problems and are more frequently observed in African American youth than Caucasian youth (Harris-McKoy & Cui, 2012; Pardini et al., 2015).

The literature appears divided on the influences of ethnicity and the impact of parental warmth on offending. From a life course perspective, individuals differ greatly by their interactions with their environment and social life events (e.g. parental influences). Income and aggressive offending are perceived in a similar point of view as it relates to parental practices and offending. Some researchers such as Vazsonyi, Trejos-Castillo, and Huang (2006), believe that parental warmth is not influenced by ethnicity. On the other hand, research has highlighted that with increases in parental warmth and support, criminal activity decreases for African and European Americans (Bradley et al, 2001). The opposite was found to be true for Hispanic Americans which goes without reiterating the strong influence of culture on the impact of the parent-child relationship (Lahlah, Van de Knaap, Bogaerts, & Lens, 2014). Despite substantial evidence in the literature supporting social factors and desistance, there are also bodies of research that argue for the internal influences on desistance and those who support a mixture of both internal and social influences.

Implications for Human Services

Implications as a result of the current study are discussed further in this section. Results of the study support that for serious juvenile offenders, ties to social institutions and maternal attachment contribute to desistance. As a result, incarceration may prove to be counterproductive to desistance as families are torn apart and ties that hold families and offenders to communities are severed, which are important social ingredients for desistance.

Implications for Service

Not any one factor can definitively say that it contributes to desistance from crime, but parental warmth has consistently shown consistent associations with the development of antisocial behavior (Pardini et al., 2015). One of the most essential steps to overcoming barriers to juvenile delinquency is the continuous development and enhancement of multi-service organizations. These nonprofit organizations offer services across multiple life struggles such as family problems, substance dependency, residence, and education to become a source of community strength. Additionally, multi-service organizations should be noted as client-focused in which human service professionals work with individuals within the community to set long-term goals, help people understand what services are needed to achieve goals, provide services in an effective manner, and follow up to ensure the achievement of goals. Regarding the desistance of juvenile crime, multi-service organizations hold the capability of adequately allowing parents and their children to receive services based on a specific plan to stopping behaviors as well as social factors that are associated with continuing crime – especially family instability. Youth and families should also be involved in implementation activities, such as choosing culturally competent supports, services, and providers; setting goals; designing, implementing, and evaluating programs; monitoring outcomes; and partnering in funding decisions (Burke, Mulvey, Schubert, & Garbin, 2014). Families and family-driven organizations provide peer supports, resources, and education to increase parents' skills and connections and strengthen the family voice. When family members and youth are engaged, supported, and respected as equal partners, their “voice” and lived experiences add valuable perspectives in planning, implementation, and monitoring which result in shared accountability for outcomes. Human services professionals can work with juvenile offenders who were previously morally disengaged to repair ties and work to uphold the values, ethics and norms that govern society. The sentencing of an individual convicted of a criminal offence is largely driven by three key considerations – punishment, deterrence, and rehabilitation. In the case of juvenile offenders, the principle of rehabilitation is often assigned the greatest weight (Nagin, Piquero, Scott, & Steinberg, 2006).

Implications for Teaching

Existing research supports young people with disabilities are more likely than young people without disabilities to engage in delinquent behavior. Roughly 30% to 50% of juvenile offenders have a documented disability, compared with about 13% of the general population (Frieden, 2003). Adolescents with certain types of disabilities are at greater risk of committing delinquent acts than adolescents without disabilities. These adolescents are also at risk of lower school performance and poorer family and peer relationship. It is important to understand that the types of disabilities are vast and may include learning, physical, sensory, emotional, as well as chronic health disabilities. Therefore, attaining the knowledge of disabilities that may occur within classrooms can become helpful for teachers and their interaction with the disabled-delinquent population. It is important to understand that the types of disabilities are vast and may include learning, physical, sensory, emotional, as well as chronic health disabilities.

Implications for Policy

It was found that juvenile courts, juvenile probation departments, and juvenile justice agencies should take affirmative steps to enhance involvement of both parents in juvenile court proceedings and follow-up interventions (Walters, 2017). The circumstances that lead to juvenile offending are nearly universally social. Poverty, exposure to violence, drug and alcohol issues in

the home as well as other environmental problems can contribute to the problem with adolescent crime. As a result, working alongside the juvenile justice system can become helpful towards the desistance of crime; however, this factor should not be taken lightly. One reason behind this is because the juvenile justice system structure and process can easily become complex. For instance, some parents may not be well informed on how to interact with law enforcement individuals who arrest their children. To make matters worse, parents often receive little guidance as to how they can effectively participate in the juvenile justice system process, and few accommodations are made to include them. Although many parents wish to participate in the process and advocate for their child, their ability to do so often is a challenge (Garfinkel, 2010). As an effort to combat this, Parent Assistance Centers can play an important role in prevention, treatment, and control of juvenile crime. For instance, these facilities can support parents with information regarding their child in the juvenile system and help them understand what is likely to happen in court. In continuance, this may include reminding rights (e.g. right to a lawyer, right to attend appointments, right to receive written material, etc.), responsibilities (e.g. filing financial forms, visiting children unless court directs otherwise, asking questions, etc.), offering tips for court (e.g. arriving early, bringing important documentation, maintaining respectful behaviors(s), etc.), and other ways that parents can get involved in court-ordered services. These efforts can be used to reduce nervousness about their child's future while also providing adequate information needed to be successful in the justice system.

Implications for Research

Singh and Kiran (2014) believed that delinquency could be promoted. For instance, a child can have inadequate parental supervision. The dynamic of feeling that there are no adequate services provided early in a child's development may often be intertwined with a parent's feeling of being unjustly blamed for an adolescent's undesirable, aggressive or rule-violating behavior (Mulvey, 2010). Thus, there should be research conducted in the future that specifically concerns parent's attitude(s) towards violence, usage of substances, and its correlation to crime desistance or augmented juvenile behaviors. Moreover, there should be a focus on serious juvenile offenders and longitudinal studies to identify changes in criminal offending and possibly offending varieties.

Conclusions

Parental behavior was found to be influential in the trajectories of serious juvenile offenders and desistance from crime. Juveniles are from a diverse background and the effect of parental practices should be taken with caution as they are influenced by diverse norms, values and culture in society. However, it is important to take into consideration the impact that parental practices have on the desistance from crime for serious juvenile offenders. More cross-cultural and longitudinal research is needed to explore the changing dynamics of the family in society as well as its effects on type of offending and desistance from crime.

The study offers several strengths such as a large sample size which allowed for good diversity and capturing the characteristics of a unique population of offenders. In addition, the study was able to capture various forms of offending variety which allowed for examining juvenile offenses from offending type. The study does not go without limitation and one such limitation is that information from the study cannot be generalized to all juvenile offender

populations. Also, due to this being a cross-sectional study, continued desistance cannot be definitively determined. Unfortunately, the only way to prove true desistance is if the individual is deceased.

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