Labeling Theory and Life Stories of Juvenile Delinquents Transitioning Into Adulthood

Prince Boamah Abrah

Abstract
Labeling theory contends that an acquisition of a criminal status can be very problematic for offenders navigating into adulthood. This article examines this assertion with the life story of 23 juvenile delinquents. The objective of the study was to gain insight into how the negative reactions of friends, families, and society worked to change and reinforced their offending behavior. The qualitative data which resulted from the use of semi-structured interview guide revealed that self-motivation of offenders to move into “new” neighborhoods and the lack of labeling triggered a turning point among those who desisted than the persistent offenders. The theoretical implication of this finding is that labeling per se may not necessarily explain persistence in crime considering how those who desisted from crime maneuvered their labeling status in the face of discrimination. In formulating a desistance theory of crime and delinquency, criminologists need to revise and evaluate traditional labeling theory with life histories of offenders in the desistance process. This shift in paradigm will inform the coping mechanism of more offenders, as well as the appropriate techniques and strategies to reduce recidivism. Strengthening prison aftercare programs, provision of institutional and social support, and the integration of residential change into post offenders’ treatment therapy will be in the right direction for policy makers.

Keywords
labeling, residential change, desistance, persistence, crime

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Introduction

Historically, several theories have been advanced within the context of sociology and criminology to explain the causal factors of crime. The works of Abrah (2006, 2014), Kirk (2012), Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002), Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), Sampson and Laub (1993), and many others have attempted to unearth the critical factors explaining stability and change in criminal trajectories. Scholars using the labeling paradigm, for example, Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera (2006), Adams (1996), Becker (1963), Lemert (1951), and Tannenbaum (1938), believe that formal interventions such as involvement with the criminal justice system affect the individual’s social networks, and the stigma of criminal status more likely increases the probability of the individual’s association with deviant social groups.

According to Becker (1963), Lemert (1951), and Tannenbaum (1938), formal social reactions to crime can be a stepping stone in the development of criminal behavior. Becker (1963) further explains that the deviant groups often provide social shelter for criminals and encourage collective rationalizations, definitions, and opportunities that encourage and facilitate deviant behavior. The labeled person thus becomes increasingly involved in social groups that consist of social deviants and unconventional others. Although several labeling theorists have mentioned this point, Tannenbaum (1938) further highlights the role of deviant networks in explaining how public labeling increases the likelihood of subsequent deviance. According to Tannenbaum (1938), when an act of deviance is publicly announced and defined as immoral, as it occurs during formal sanctions, the immoral character of the actor is highlighted. Thus, in as much as the information about the formal sanction spreads throughout the community, others will tend to define the juvenile as a criminal deviant. Hence, stereotypical images of criminals in the mainstream culture are driven to the forefront of the person’s life. Becker (1963), Goffman (1963), Lemert (1951), and Simmons (1965) have also observed that stereotyping of social deviants is usually negative, in the sense that deviants are often thought of as irresponsible individuals lacking self-control. Labeled teenagers may become aware of stereotypical beliefs in their communities, or they may think that these beliefs exist based on their learned perception of what people think about criminals.

In view of this, the labeled juvenile may withdraw from interaction with conventional peers. Goffman (1963) also explains that social interaction between “normal” people and the stigmatized is often characterized by uneasiness, embarrassment, ambiguity, and intense efforts at impression management and that these experiences are felt by those who bear the stigma as well as those who do not. Goffman (1963) further asserts that the very anticipation of such contacts can lead the normal and the stigmatized persons to arrange life so as to avoid them. Put in other words, the nonlabeled adolescents and labeled adolescents may tend to avoid one another to avoid uncomfortable interaction dynamics. Recent studies have also documented the negative effects of official labeling on structured opportunities and parental bonding. The works of Bernburg et al. (2006), Davies and Tanner (2003), and Sampson and Laub (1993) explain that the consequences of these elements may
result in the individual seeking deviant groups to be with those who are in a similarly disadvantaged social position, who share their deviant self-concept and attitudes, and perhaps provide opportunities that the conventional world no longer offers. However, Bernburg et al. (2006) maintain that “research on the mediating role of social ties to deviant others has been rare” (p. 68). It is obvious that “by failing to consider the requisite intervening effects, the bulk of [labeling] studies do not constitute a valid test of labeling theory” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, as cited in Bernburg et al., 2006, p. 68).

Sampson and Laub (1993) also note that the notion of cumulative continuity is consistent with the original contentions of labeling theory, that reactions to primary deviance may create problems of adjustments that foster additional crime in the form of secondary deviance (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951). A good example is the negative effects incarcerations have on future employment. However, not much research has been done on those groups of individuals who acquire labeling status, yet desist from crime. Within the context of Ghana, the works of Antwi (2015), Abrah (2006, 2014), Hagan (2013), Yawson (2013), and others have explored the critical factors explaining the persistence of crime.

The study of Antwi (2015) and Hagan (2013), for example, identified social rejection and stigmatization as one of the major transitional challenges that ex-convicts face. This labeling which manifests itself in the form of negative attitudes by friends, families, and neighbors more likely predisposes these offenders to commit a subsequent crime. Consequently, their acquisition of a labeling status also affects their ability to get jobs after prisons.

Regardless of the useful contributions made by these studies to the literature of crime, limited knowledge exists to tell us how all the labeled (juvenile delinquent/ex-convicts) maneuver their status in the face of negative societal reactions as they navigate adulthood. This study uses a qualitative case study approach to explore the effect of formal criminal labeling on juvenile delinquents in adulthood. Theoretically, this article extends previous work by examining closely the predisposing factors mediating the processes of managing the delinquent status among juvenile delinquents who have persisted in crime and those who were in the desistance process.

The Context for the Study

Within the Ghanaian social context, people who usually commit offensive crimes such as murder, manslaughter, rape, defilement, driving offenses, abetment of crime, armed robbery, stealing, and others are often sentenced to prison. In prisons, these offenders are given the opportunity to learn and acquire vocational training skills and education during their period of sentence. The main rehabilitation programs available in most Ghanaian Correctional Institutions are vocational training and education. The vocational training programs include carpentry, tailoring, soap making, barbering, block-laying, and concreting, among others. The educational programs are mainly junior and secondary education, information and communication technology, and nonformal
education. These programs are designed to meet the offender’s specific needs to ensure effective rehabilitation and reformation.

An examination of the impact of rehabilitation programs at Ghanaian prisons on ex-convicts indicates that the majority of recidivists who acquire vocational training and education do not get jobs after prison. Hagan (2013) stated that “participating in either the vocational or educational programs does not necessarily make inmates employable” (p. 111). The study of Hagan (2013) revealed that out of the 38 recidivists who enrolled in the vocational training programs at the Nsawam Medium Security Prison, only 37% of them had jobs. The majority of them, 63%, were not able to get jobs after discharge; his study further reported that those recidivists who had jobs were mainly into occupations such as farming, trading, janitors, tailoring, shoemaking, and potters, among others. The relatively low income associated with these types of jobs predisposes these individuals to renew their offending behavior. Hagan (2013) further observed that out of the eighteen (18) recidivists who enrolled in the educational program, only 33% of them were able to get a job. On the other hand, 67% of them were not able to get any kind of jobs (pp.107-108). The study of Yawson (2013) also revealed that some ex-convicts who left the prisons have difficulties finding accommodation. It is either their rooms have been given out for rent by their family members or they are refused accommodation especially if they commit crimes such as robbery, theft, rape, or murder. Yawson (2013) further provides a detailed account of how some religious groups and private and non-governmental organizations support ex-convicts after prisons. The main factors which have been linked with recidivism in Ghana are ineffective formal institutional support and social support. According to Antwi (2015),

[The] institutional push factors which predispose offenders to renew their offending behavior include the problem of finance, lack of specific treatments, profile of inmates and short sentences, lack of interest to participate in rehabilitation by the inmate, inconvenience and security concerns, mass incarceration and lack of program integrity, absence of parole and an ineffective aftercare system. (p. 194)

As observed in the trends of the reviewed literature, the major challenges facing ex-convicts in Ghana are ineffective formal institutional factors, social stigma, and rejection from friends, families, and neighbors. These elements as indicated in the literature pose as risk factors for recidivism in Ghana. Filling our knowledge gaps on the effects of labeling and reoffending, this article provides narratives of juvenile delinquents whose life history suggests that amid negative societal reactions of family, friends, and neighbors, some group of delinquents are able to change their offending paths in adulthood. Table 1 illustrates the trend of recidivism rates in Ghana from 2011 to 2016.

As indicated in Table 1, in 2011, the recidivism rate which was 5.89% increased to 6.11% in 2012. From 2013 to 2015, the rate dropped from 4.53% to 2.62% and later experienced a relative increase to 4.41% in 2016. This pattern indicates that the recidivism rate in Ghana is not stable.
This study forms part of a larger qualitative study that sought to examine the transitions embedded in offending trajectories of juvenile delinquents who were in their adulthood. For this article, the analysis focuses on two groups of delinquents, namely, those who have persisted in crime and were serving their term of the sentence at an adult prison in Ghana and those who were in the desistance process living normal lives at their residences, schools, and workplaces. The study closely examined qualitative interviews conducted with the participants as they experienced the social world. The author’s intent is to use these rich data to evaluate the theoretical underpinnings of labeling theories and to contribute to the literature on desistance. The findings will serve as a foundation for larger studies to explore the extent to which criminals manage their labeling status in the face of negative societal interaction.

**Method**

This study forms part of a larger qualitative study that sought to examine the transitions embedded in offending trajectories of juvenile delinquents who were in their adulthood. For this article, the analysis focuses on two groups of delinquents, namely, those who have persisted in crime and were serving their term of the sentence at an adult prison in Ghana and those who were in the desistance process living normal lives at their residences, schools, and workplaces. The study closely examined qualitative interviews conducted with the participants as they experienced the social world. The author’s intent is to use these rich data to evaluate the theoretical underpinnings of labeling theories and to contribute to the literature on desistance. The findings will serve as a foundation for larger studies to explore the extent to which criminals manage their labeling status in the face of negative societal interaction.

**Study Sites**

The researcher used two groups of juvenile delinquents who have passed through the Senior Boys Correctional Centre (SBCC) and the Junior Girls Correctional Centre in Accra, Ghana: on one hand, those who are leading their normal lives in their communities, schools, or place of work and, on the other hand, those who have been incarcerated at the Nsawam Medium Security Prison in Ghana. According to the prison’s record, the SBCC which was previously known as the Ghana Borstal Institute was established in May 1947 by the colonial administration for young offenders who were in conflict with the law.

The institution is managed by the Ghana prison service and is located at Mamobi, a suburb of Accra. The institution is made in such a way that inmates live their normal lives. Unlike adult prisons where security is the main concern, at the SBCC security is usually not the major concern; hence, the entire facility is not fenced. The institution houses and gives skills training and education to juvenile delinquents between the ages of 14 and 19 to enable them to have successful adulthoods. A juvenile is sent to the institution only when the juvenile court is satisfied with a social inquiry report by the police and a probation officer, usually a social worker, regarding the offender’s conduct, previous criminal record, and the circumstances under which the crime was
committed. Upon arrival at the correctional facility, the juvenile is interviewed on his trade interest. Juvenile delinquents who are found to be academically good are also given the opportunity to pursue formal education to the Senior High School level. The vocational training programs being offered at the SBCC include auto-mechanics and electronics, general electrical, ceramics, welding and blacksmithing, shoemaking, tailoring, carpentry, draughtsmanship, and block-laying.

Upon discharge, the juvenile delinquents who acquire vocational training skills are given National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) proficiency Grade 2 certificates. Those who acquire formal education are given Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSE). The major challenges of the SBCC as of the time of this research were inadequate and obsolete workshop equipment, lack of training materials, absence of fenced wall around the entire correctional facility, lack of cooperation between prison officers and parents of offenders, inability of parents to visit their wards in the institution, and absence of social workers during discharge board meetings. With these challenges, the management of the correctional facility was putting in all the necessary measures to upgrade the equipment at the workshop.

**Sampling Strategies and Representatives**

The sampling strategies and representativeness of this study included the recruitment procedures that were used to gather the information as well as the sampling techniques which were employed. The inclusion criteria were not based on gender discrimination. To recruit participants for the study, the researcher made presentations in which he shared the purpose of the study with stakeholders, such as correctional service providers, prison officers, the police, social workers, colleagues, and members in the academic community. These interactions paved the way for the researcher to acquire all the available literature and sources of relevant information, which made the study possible. As there was no systematic database from which tracking of delinquents could be possible, the researcher relied on prison staff to provide him with a list of contacts of juvenile delinquents who have passed through the correctional facility. Given the few contacts, purposive snowball sampling techniques were used to select and interview 23 juvenile delinquents who were in their adulthood. Ethical concerns were addressed by following all ethical procedures outlined by the University of Ghana Ethics Committee for Humanities before proceeding with the data collection. Consent of participants was sought in a written form enabling them to fix their thumbprint or signature. Consent details were explained to them in English and in their own language. This was to give them the opportunity to understand the implication of the study and the scope and nature of questions they were likely to answer. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity as codes and pseudonyms were used instead of their original names. In respect of the issue of sensitivity, participation in the interview was voluntary. The researcher also ensured that interviews were done in a setting which allowed the participants to share their lived experiences without any interruptions.
Data Collection

The research design was qualitative. In a real sense, a variety of data collection efforts took place for the larger study; this article, however, focuses on the interviews conducted with the participants on the questions of how labeling explains (their) persistence and desistance from crime. The interview process took a period of 12 months. A semi-structured interview guide was used to tease out the participants’ experiences of how their family, friends, and the entire members of society reacted toward their delinquent status after their exit from the correctional facility and how these sentiments influenced/affected their offending trajectory. The interviews lasted for a maximum of 60 to 90 min for both groups. The interviews were recorded in the form of field notes as the prison for security purposes does not allow a researcher to use recorders of any kind. Follow-ups were made at any point the researcher needed clarifications on the information provided by the participants.

Data Analysis

As pointed out earlier, a total number of 23 juvenile delinquents who were in their adulthood participated in this study; they included 13 persistent offenders (12 males, one female) and nine males and one female in the desistance process. The female offender as of the point of the interview was the only person who passed through a junior correctional facility. Tables 2 and 3 provide the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 2 summarizes the sociodemographic characteristics of the persistent offenders in an Adult Prison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Namea</th>
<th>Sexb</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Types of offenses committed in adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gyemfi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Defilement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kumson</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rock son</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Narcotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Opoku</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Narcotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Adu</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Defilement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Agyeman</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mensah</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Narcotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mumuni</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Adom</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Possession of arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ofori</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Narcotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Nortey</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Narcotics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kyeiwaa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aThese are pseudonyms.

*bM = male; F = female.

Tables 2 and 3 provide the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.
Table 3. Sociodemographic Backgrounds of Participants Who Were in the Desistance Process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Offenses committed in adolescence phase of development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Edem</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Abieku</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Defiling a young girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Defiling a young girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Musa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Alhassan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Owuraku</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Defiling a young girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mawuli</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kwesi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kwame</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Akwele</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are pseudonyms.

M = male; F = female.

Table 4. Patterns and Variations in the Data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects of labeling</th>
<th>Persistent offenders $N = 13$</th>
<th>Desistance process $N = 10$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Societal acceptance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative reactions of family members</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative reactions of society</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 summarizes the sociodemographic characteristics of the delinquents who were in the desistance process. This table illustrates their names (pseudonyms), sex, age, and their previous offense which led to their commitment at the SBCC.

Results

Using the life stories of 23 adult juvenile delinquents, this study addresses the question of how labeling explains persistence or desistance from crime throughout adulthood. The results of the study as presented in Table 4 give the patterns of responses as the participants experienced the social world after they had left the SBCC. The critical questions were to find out how their interactions with friends, family, and neighbors strained their social relationships, which consequently modified their offending paths. As seen in Table 4, both groups (those who persisted in crime and those in the desistance process) experienced some levels of negative societal reaction. Nevertheless, those in the desistance process were more likely to change their residential location in the face of stigmatization which facilitated their desistance than those who persisted in crime.
As indicated in Table 4, the three main concepts emerging from the narrative data were societal acceptance, negative reaction of family members, and negative reaction of society. These themes are discussed in an orderly and systematic manner at the section on presentation of the research findings. Given the 13 persistent offenders who participated in the study, three and six offenders, respectively, experienced a positive and negative reaction from society and family members. The remaining four felt rejected by members of society. In the case of those who were in the desistance processes, while two and three were accepted and rejected, respectively, the remaining five experienced negative reactions from society. Under the themes outlined below, the negative reactions toward the participants’ acts of criminality are discussed in relation to whether these changed and/or reinforced their offending behavior.

Presentation of Findings

This section of the article discusses the main themes emerging from the narrative data. The themes include social acceptance and modification of criminal behavior, negative reactions of family and residential change, negative reactions of family and persistence in crime, and negative societal reactions of neighbors and persistence in crime. These themes are discussed in detail with direct quotations from the participants.

Societal Acceptance and Modification of Criminal Behaviors

The concept of social acceptance was derived as a recurring theme from the pattern of responses given by the participants in the study. According to the participants who persisted in crime, when they left the correctional facility, their neighbors and family members welcomed them nicely without any sense of stigma, rejection, or intimidation. The respondents used words such as “love” and “affection” to demonstrate the warm relationships they had with their families and friends. A few quotations illustrating this theme is indicated below:

. . . I didn’t have any problem at all meeting my family, friends, and neighbors… They received me nicely and showed me much love and affection . . . They didn’t make me feel bad . . . I had a good relationship with everybody; nobody made me feel like I was not part of them . . . (Respondent 11, Ofori, 28-year-old persistent offender)

. . . I didn’t face any stigma or rejections at all . . . my family accepted and treated me nicely. . . . They all knew what happened to me was just an accident . . . life was normal . . . I had no problem relating to everyone . . . (Respondent 3, Kumson, 20-year-old persistent offender)

. . . Everybody had a good perception about me and they related with me passionately . . . In fact, they realized that I was a changed person . . . (Respondent 4, Rockson, a 20-year-old persistent offender)
As realized from the narratives of those who persisted in crime, regardless of how responsive the levels of social acceptance, their inherent desire for crime continued through adulthood. In our quest to understand how labeling explains persistence and desistance of crime, the statement of three out of the 13 respondents who persisted in crime does not seem to reinforce the claim that labeling explains persistence of crime, as the group of participants who continued in crime through adulthood reported no feeling of stigma, rejections, or intimidations as a result of labeling or their delinquent status.

As expected by traditional labeling theory, such warmth and affection that the three persistent offenders had should have acted as a catalyst of change, yet this affection and warmth rather strengthened their criminal careers, indicating that other factors beyond labeling explain the persistence of crime over an individual life course. As observed from the narratives, acquiring a delinquent status per se may not always be problematic for some groups of offenders who pass through the criminal justice system. This is argued by labeling theorists such as Becker (1966), Lemert (1951), and Tannenbaum (1938) and supported by recent evidence given by nine out of the 10 participants who maneuvered their delinquent status in the face of stigma and discrimination.

Compared with those who desisted from crime, some of them never experienced any form of social rejection because their family members and neighbors did not know they had been to the SBCC. The quotations of the underlisted participants illustrate this point:

. . . when I left the SBCC, my family, as well as my neighbors, welcomed me warmly, our neighbors had no knowledge of me having been to a correctional facility so everyone related to me nicely . . . I didn’t feel bad . . . (Respondent 3, Hope, 22-year-old desister)

When I left the SBCC I moved to Accra . . . here in Accra I don’t have any challenges because nobody knows I have ever been to the SBCC . . . (Respondent 8, Kwesi, 26-year-old desister)

For those who were in the desistance process, nine out of the 10 had to change their residential locations or move to different neighborhoods as a result of stigma and rejection from family and neighbors. Details of how they maneuvered their labeling status are discussed in the next subsection on family rejection and residential change.

To conclude, it can be said that although labeling to some degree may explain the persistence of crime, the narratives frequently provide examples of individuals who never experienced any stigma or any negative societal reaction, yet persisted in or desisted from crime through adulthood. In this sense, acquiring a delinquent status may not always strain social interactions between the labeled and the conventional others.

We still need to know more about how some groups of delinquents are able to manage their delinquent status and yet desist from crime as they transition to adulthood, perhaps by using a much larger sample size. The narratives of some of the participants give the indications that labeling or stigma offers relatively little explanation as to why
some group of offenders persists in crime through adulthood. The next section dis-
cusses the relationship between labeling and desistance resulting from moving into
new neighborhoods.

**Negative Reactions of Family Members and Residential
Change**

The lived experiences of the participants in the desistance process establish a relation-
ship between labeling and residential change. According to Kirk (2012),

> many former prisoners return home to the same residential environment, with the same
criminal opportunities and criminal peers, where they resided before incarceration. If the
path to desistance from crime largely requires knifing off from past situations and
establishing a new set of routine activities, then returning to one’s old environment and
routines may drastically limit an ex-convict’s already dismal chances of desisting from
crime. (p. 329)

Kirk’s assertion clearly illustrates that living in the same old environment that an
individual commits an offense in may pose risks and hazard to the individual in late
adulthood in the sense that they may have the same deviant peers who will resocialize
them into deviant groups and associations. Kirk (2012) further highlights that if crimi-
nal behavior is inextricably tied to social contexts, then by separating individuals from
those contexts associated with their previous criminality, it may likely reduce their
offending behavior. Consistent with Kirk (2012), a similar observation was also made
when the respondents were asked whether they were living in the same residence or
area where they first committed the offense.

As indicated in their narratives, it was realized that virtually all those who desisted
from crime (one out of nine) had changed their previous location and residence com-
pared with the 13 persistent offenders who remained in the same neighborhood where
they committed the offense. The change of residence was seen as one of the critical
factors which facilitated their desistance. For those who desisted from crime, it was
also realized that by changing their residence and respective locations, the respondents
were able to maneuver their delinquent status away from contamination. The relation-
ship between residential change and desistance is illustrated in the statements of the
few selected cases listed below.

According to Alhassan, when he went back to his community, the people were all
excited about him and wondered where he went as he was looking so good, but the
only problem that forced him to leave his family was the negative reaction and intimi-
dation that he received from his family members; this is how he shared his story:

> . . . Since my neighbors did not know I had ever been to the SBCC . . . when they first
saw me, they were very happy. . . . Some said I was looking so handsome . . . when
they see me in town they would say “baabi a wokɔɛɛ yɛɛ no ṣɛɛɔɛ yɛɛ ɛnti san kɔɔ hɔɔ
bio” [ meaning in Akan, that where you went is good, do go back again] . . . but I had
a challenge with my family members . . . my brother and some of our family members would be saying that watch out, the thief is here, if you have some items put them in a safe place else he would steal them . . . such comments made me feel so bad so one day I packed up my things and came to my master in Accra . . . (A 23-year-old desister)

Similarly, Mawuli had the same experience:

. . . When I left the SBCC, my family had the perception that a person who had ever been to prison [correctional facility] is bad . . . they would always say that so far as I had been to prison I am a bad boy . . . any time they made such statements I felt so bad so I distanced myself from them . . . either we fought or I will beat you up if I am older than you or I will hurt you when you are older than me. I also experienced the same negative reactions from neighbors. Because of this, I moved to Accra to look for a job. (A 23-year-old desister)

The response of the participants highlights the factors explaining how they managed their delinquent status. The first thing was that they moved from their previous locations to new neighborhoods where people did not know they had been to a correctional facility. The absence of labeling facilitated their desistance. They found themselves in places where people were not aware of their criminal records. These observations suggest that knifing off one’s past location or environment decreases one’s level of involvement in the crime. As evident from the individual responses, with the exception of the female who continued to live in the same environment after her release to the community, all the men changed their residence and moved into an entirely new environment as a way of getting away from their labeling status and freeing themselves from stigma and rejections by members of society.

These indications support Sharkey and Sampson (2010) who conclude that moving beyond the city helps reduce violence, in part, because of the physical distance from old neighborhoods and because it means severing ties to those city institutions (namely, the Chicago Public Schools) that may facilitate criminal behavior. Although the socioeconomic context of delinquent reentry into crime remains important to consider, the findings of this study, though limited in its sample size, suggest that separating oneself from prior contexts improves a juvenile delinquent’s prospects of desisting from crime. Just as Sharkey and Sampson (2010) concluded, the relevance of place is not just found in socioeconomic conditions in the sense that even if individuals move to neighborhoods bereft of economic opportunities, they may still fare better than if they had returned home to a similarly disadvantaged neighborhood. Laub and Sampson (2003) further stressed that residential change may be particularly meaningful for the process of desistance if it prompts a change in daily routines and provides a structured daily routine that includes meaningful activities.

**Negative Reactions of Family and Persistence in Crime**

Among the same persistent offender respondents, others reported negative sentiments, discriminations, and rejections from their immediate and extended family members.
Others had negative reactions from community members but not from immediate and extended families. According to them, these negative experiences redirected their paths into deviant groups and associations. The stories of Nortey and Kyeiwaa illustrate how the negative reactions of their own biological parents pushed them into deviant groups:

. . . When I returned from the SBCC, my family rejected me . . . they saw me as a bad boy . . . I didn’t experience any negative reaction from neighbors, because they didn’t know I had been to the prison . . . The only problem I had was my mother . . . I was her second, born but any time she saw me she drove me away from the house when other family members also saw me they pointed their fingers at me “enti na menni abusua biara” . . . Meaning—“I had no family” . . . I didn’t feel happy in the house . . . Nobody supported me . . . In fact; life became very difficult for me so I went back to my old friends who welcomed me nicely. I didn’t want to do the things they were doing, but the circumstance forced me to . . . At night we went and stole and I started smoking . . .

(Nortey, a 24-year-old persistent offender)

. . . Any time I return from prison, my parents don’t want to see my face in the house . . . my father even told me if he allows me to stay in his house, I will bring armed robbers to come and rob him . . . because of that I don’t go near my parents or family members for them to look down upon me. (Kyeiwaa, a 31-year-old female offender)

In the case of Mumini, a 35-year-old persistent offender, he experienced only stigma and rejection after his return from prison because the family thought he had brought disgrace to them:

. . . When I returned from the SBCC my family accepted me . . . But when I later returned from prison, their attitude towards me changed, they thought I had brought disgrace to the family, so they isolated themselves from me. When they see me they do not want to come close; it affected me so much, I felt so rejected, but my friends accepted and encouraged me to keep up in the midst of all the troubles . . .

Similarly, Adu also shared a bitter experience about his brother:

. . . My brother told me that anybody who had ever been to a correctional institution is a dangerous person, so any time he sees me he insults me . . . Anytime I go to his house, his wife would tell me that my brother says he is afraid of me, so I stopped going there, I didn’t face any negative reaction from my neighbors, they rather advised me to be a good boy . . .

According to Opoku, the major challenge he had was from his extended family members:

. . . I had no problem with my immediate family, the only problem I had was with my extended family. When my uncle died, I was the next of kin, but they denied me that honor because I had been to prison . . . (The 50-year-old persistent offender)
Compared with those who desisted from crime, six out of the 13 persistent offenders indicated that they experienced negative reactions from their family members, and three out of the 10 in the desistance process responded in the affirmative suggesting that the persistent offenders were more likely to experience labeling and rejection from family.

As is evident from the narratives, the intimidation, the negative reaction, and the stigma were unbearable for some to cope with, which consequently redirected their paths toward deviance. As indicated in Mumuni’s quotation, his correctional experience was seen as a total disgrace to his family; hence, he experienced outright rejection. In the words of Adu, his social tie with his family was weakened as a result of his delinquent status, while Opoku could not succeed his uncle due to his contact with the prison system.

In each case, the respondents reported feelings of rejection, stigma, and intimidation. In view of these, they had no better option to manage their delinquent status than to seek solace and comfort in deviant groups and associations where they were accepted without compromise.

Contextually, being in prison as an individual has negative connotations. Most traditional norms and cultures in Ghana and most parts of the world see the “the prisoner” as a social misfit. In most cases, a person who had ever been to prison loses prestige and dignity in society. Apart from strict compliance with cultural norms and practices, Ghanaians are very sympathetic; however, the participants abused the sense of apathy and empathy shown to them by their family and members of their respective communities.

With these indications, the findings support Sampson and Laub (1993) that the weakening of social bonds in adulthood explains the persistence of crime. Furthermore, the findings also support the claim made by traditional labeling scholars, notably, Goffman (1963), Becker (1963), Antwi (2015), Hagan (2013), and Yawson (2013) who contend that the labeling an individual acquires from the criminal justice system increases his or her chances of recidivism.

**Negative Reactions of Society and Persistence of Crime**

Bernburg et al. (2006) have asserted that official or formal adjudication for an offense may create or enhance the reputation of a juvenile as a criminal in his or her community. Tannenbaum (1938) further highlighted that formal criminal proceedings signify the “dramatization of evil” when the act of deviance is publicly announced and defined as immoral as occurs during formal sanction, the immoral character of the actor is foregrounded and publicized. As the information about the formal sanction spreads throughout the community, others tend to define the juvenile as a criminal deviant. Hence, stereotypical images of criminals in the mainstream culture are driven to the forefront of the person’s life (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Lemert, 1951). Consistent with Bernburg et al. (2006), Simmons (1965), Becker (1963), and Goffman (1963), it was realized that some of the respondents were found to arrange life so as to avoid conventional interactions because of the negatively held perceptions and reactions
members of society have toward them. Narrating their stories, some of the respondents also felt rejection from the members of society. The individual quotations explain how some of the respondents felt in their respective communities:

. . . Upon my release from the SBCC, I had no problem with my family, but my neighbors doubted if I had truly reformed because they thought I was a murderer . . . they rejected me . . . because of the way they treated me, I stopped getting close to them . . . they always made me feel bad when I was around them . . . (Respondent 10, Adom, 38-year-old persistent offender)

. . . Neighbors disliked and rejected me . . . I was also nicknamed “rejected stone” . . . in fact, they really discriminated against me . . . People did not want to be friends with me anymore; in fact, this condition lowered my self-esteem . . . I became paranoid with people as I often thought they were thinking ill of me. My family was, however, receptive and supported me very much. (Respondent 7, Agyeman, a 23-year-old persistent offender)

. . . My family received me nicely; I spent only a few months with my family and got arrested again . . . There was a time my neighbors pointed their fingers at me that I was a criminal . . . sometimes I responded other times I didn’t . . . I wasn’t bothered by what they said . . . after all, is it a shame to go to prison? (Respondent 1, Agyeman, a 19-year-old persistent offender)

. . . In the community, they pointed fingers at me that this is the girl from prison . . . When they made such comments I felt so bad. (Respondent 13. Kyeiwaa, 31-year-old female offender)

In contrast, Akwele lived in the same neighborhood where she committed the offense and yet desisted from crime. This was how she shared her story:

. . . When I left the Girls Correctional Centre, I came to live with my parents in the same house as before I left to the correctional facility. Even though people in the community sometimes pointed their fingers at me, I was not bothered because I know I’m not what they think I am . . . (A 22-year-old female desister)

As observed from the several responses provided by the respondents, there were sentiments of stereotyping and discriminations as the respondents interacted with neighbors in their respective communities. As indicated, stereotyping of social deviants by members of society can pave the way for some groups of delinquents to persist in crime throughout adulthood in the sense that it weakens their bond with neighbors who should have acted as agents of informal control.

Comparatively, while four out of the 13 persistent offenders indicated that they experienced negative sentiment from members of the community, five out of the 10 participants who desisted from crime also had the same experience. Akwele, for example, lived in the same environment despite the negative reaction of neighbors in the community. However, the negative remarks directed toward her did not reinforce her
offending behavior. As observed from the narratives, while the stereotypical images and the negatively held perceptions formed by the conventional others during normal interactions pushed the persistent offenders into deviant groups and associations, the presence and lack of labeling triggered a turning point, namely, a change of residence among those who desisted from crime.

While these findings support Sampson and Laub (1993), Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), and Durkheim (1950), that weakening of social bonds to family and society are some of the critical factors that explain why some groups of individuals persist in crime and develop criminal careers it also reaffirms Becker’s (1963) and Lemert’s (1951) claim that stigma diminishes self-worth by making offenders less likely to be productive citizens because of their difficulty in reestablishing positive bonds with prosocial institutions. The experiences exemplified in the narratives of those who desisted from crime serve as indicators for future criminologists to begin to revise, rethink, and evaluate the claim of labeling theory.

**Conclusion**

The article which set out to investigate the extent to which labeling explains persistence in crime and desistance from crime concludes based on the experiences shared by the participants that labeling per se does not necessarily explain the persistence of crime—in the sense that the narratives of the participants frequently projects voices of juvenile delinquents who managed their delinquents’ status as a result of their inherent desire to change from deviant behavior and also by staying in or changing their residence/environment where they first committed the crime.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on crime in two ways. First, the narratives of the participants depart from the speculation made by scholars of the labeling paradigm such as Bernburg et al. (2006), Adams (1996), Becker (1963), Lemert (1951), and Tannenbaum (1938) who believe that formal interventions such as involvement with the criminal justice system affect the individual’s social networks and the stigma of criminal status more likely increases the probability of the individual’s association in deviant social groups. Second, this article also contributes to the literature on crime and desistance by unraveling two critical elements to desistance, namely, the individual’s inherent desire to change from wrongdoing and moving to new residence/neighborhoods other than the one in which the act of criminality was first committed.

**Policy Implications of the Study**

The life stories of the juvenile delinquents transitioning into adulthood provide very useful ideas and concepts worth considering for the desistance paradigm of crime and delinquency and also for evaluating the labeling theory of crime. The findings do have implications for criminal and penal justice policies as well. The observations made in relation to residential change and desistance from crime suggest that there is the need for state and private institutions to integrate residential change as post offender’s
treatment therapy for ex-convicts. Reintegration policies and programs geared toward this direction to a large extent will work toward the reformation of ex-convicts as the “new environment” where neighbors barely know the offenders worked to transform their criminal behaviors.

As the self-motivations of the participant to relocate to new neighborhoods resulted mainly from stigma and social rejections, it would be prudent for criminal justice experts and practitioners to reconsider addressing social reintegration programs from the point of arrest, incarceration, and release. Sensitization programs should highlight the effects stereotype has on recidivism. Aftercare agents/social workers should also make frequent follow-ups on offenders after release to assist in the reintegration process.

**Theoretical Contribution of the Study**

The narratives of the participants seem to suggest that labeling per se does not explain persistence in crime as desistance from crime came mostly from the self-motivation of the offenders to leave their original neighborhoods and settle in areas where their neighbors barely know them. This situation allowed those in the desistance process to start anew, so to speak. Yet, one cannot decidedly dismiss labeling here as its absence in this “new” environment is, in fact, a form of support for the labeling framework. Thus, precisely the lack of labeling, due to the move to a new neighborhood, enabled those who were in the desistance process to start a new life because neighbors in the new environment did not know they were institutionalized. This in itself could serve as evidence that, indeed, lack of labeling may work toward reforming offenders, especially when this is juxtaposed with the cases of some of the participants/ex-offenders who were “labeled” and rejected by family and neighbors. Gearing toward a desistance paradigm of crime and delinquency, criminologists need to evaluate the ideas of traditional labeling theory of crime using life histories of ex-convicts in the desistance process.

**The Theoretical Model of Delinquent Status Management and Processes of Desistance**

The theoretical model of delinquent status management and processes of desistance was developed from the pattern of responses given by the participants as they shared their life stories on how labeling explains their persistence and desistance from crime (Figure 1). The theoretical model illustrates the coping mechanism and strategies adopted by the delinquents to maneuver their labeling status in the face of negative societal reactions. While both groups (persistent offenders and those who desisted from crime) experienced some levels of negative societal reactions from their immediate family members and society, those in the desistance process were more likely to manipulate/maneuver/accommodate their labeling status through support given to them by their family and private institutions, changing their residence and thus facilitating their inherent desire to desist from crime and their personal
motivation to desist from crime. For the persistent offenders, living in the same environment where they committed the crimes, which led to their incarceration and negative reaction from neighbors and family members, relinquished them to deviant groups and associations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Figure 1. The theoretical model of persistence in crime and delinquent status management.


