GIVE FIRST

Why deterrence through loss is the wrong theory of crime,
and what the evidence says actually works.

The Theory That Was Never True

In 1968, economist Gary Becker published a paper that would shape criminal justice policy for the next fifty years. His argument was elegant: crime is a rational choice. Potential offenders weigh expected gains against expected costs — the probability of being caught, multiplied by the severity of punishment. Increase the cost, reduce the crime. Simple.

I had a mate big Kikka. He was in and out of prison since he was 18 – 24. Mum was a heroin addict and he was constantly taken by the state. Then his mum would do some court mandated drug things to get them back. They go back and repeat. He has a story of his skull being fractured. His mum agreed to sleep with a man for heroin. She used the heroin and was passing out and this guy still wanted to you know. My mate who was around 8 at the time tried to stop him and was beaten and stomped by a grown-up. It wasn't a nice environment he learnt early that only way to stay safe from violence is using extreme violence.

He grew to be a very large man and was very good at punching people. If he felt threatened or disrespected, he would hurt the other person to remain safe. Kikka went to prison for the first time at 18 - being capable at fighting caused him to do it more often. In prison fighting ability = higher status this didn't help his reoffending. Over beers, he'd just got out, he was telling me he's sick of going to jail all the time but how being out of prison and finding housing money is difficult. He never had a job before.

One of my mates was working with a demolition company. I asked him if he really wanted it. He said yes and was genuine. I spoke to my mate who asked his boss and he got an interview he explained his situation that he was essentially homeless he would sleep on mates coaches here and there but had no stability the guy offered him a job and gave him an old caravan he had and they worked out an amount he could afford to pay from his pay each week for the caravan. We caught up for beers about 6 months later he was showing me all the reno's he done on the caravan how he is working every day how a bloke said something to him at the pub he would typically react to but he was like "I didn't though brother coz I got shit to lose for the first time ever bro".

And I got Jono (his boss) I can't let him down fucking up he said and he never returned to prison he is now 32 or 33, I think. Alot of serial offenders aren't deterred by taking stuff because they aren't afraid to lose what you can take but giving something is the key for some people showing them another life having things they care about, they don't want to lose -- is a deterrent.

The theory was intellectually coherent. It was also built on an assumption nobody checked.

It assumed people had something to lose.

Becker's model works perfectly — for a middle-class homeowner calculating whether to risk a parking fine. It works considerably less well for a twenty-two-year-old who has never had stable housing, has no employment history, and learned before he was ten years old that the world will hurt you if you appear vulnerable. For that person, the expected cost of punishment is not subtraction from a good life. It is a marginal change to a life already defined by loss.

> *You cannot threaten to take from someone who has nothing. You cannot deter through subtraction when there is nothing left to subtract.*

The research has been saying this plainly for decades. A 2014 review by the National Academy of Sciences examining over four decades of mandatory sentencing found no evidence that sentence severity reduces crime rates. Certainty of apprehension — the sense that someone is watching — produces modest effects. Harshness of punishment, once past a basic threshold, produces essentially none.

National Research Council, The Growth of Incarceration in the United States (2014)

The United States doubled its incarceration rate between 1975 and 1985. Then doubled it again. By 2008 it imprisoned more people per capita than any country on earth. Recidivism remained stubbornly, persistently at 40−60%. The threat got louder. The behaviour did not change.

The theory was not refined. It was just repeated, louder, at greater expense.

What Young Men Are Actually Asking For

In 2016, journalist Sebastian Junger published Tribe — a short, devastating book about why American combat veterans were returning from war and falling apart at home. The statistics were confusing at first glance: PTSD rates for soldiers in active combat zones were lower than for those who had returned to civilian life. How could coming home be more traumatic than war?

Junger's answer was not what anyone expected.

In combat, soldiers had tribe. Clear purpose. Genuine brotherhood. Roles that mattered. Status earned through demonstrated competence and courage. Every single day contained undeniable meaning — keep the people beside you alive. Return to civilian life — suburbs, shopping centres, jobs in which nothing was at stake and nobody needed them — and that meaning evaporated overnight.

> *The problem was not what happened in the war. The problem was what was waiting at home. Nothing. No tribe. No duty. No role that felt real.*

Sebastian Junger, Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging (2016)

This is not a veterans problem. It is a young men problem. And it is ancient.

Evolutionary psychologists David Geary and Mark Flinn have documented extensively that male coalitional behaviour — the drive to form groups with clear purpose, hierarchy by merit, and shared mission — is among the most ancient and consistent features of human male psychology. For tens of thousands of years, this drive had a natural container: the hunt, the defence of the group, the

construction of shelter, the initiation rites that marked the transition from boy to man with clear expectation and genuine consequence.

Geary & Flinn, Evolution of Human Parental Behavior and the Human Family (2001)

What happens to that drive when the container is removed?

Consider the most popular video game franchise in the history of the medium. Call of Duty. Not named accidentally. It gives its players clear objectives, measurable skill progression, genuine brotherhood, status earned by merit, and — most critically — a role in something larger than themselves. It offers, in simulation, everything that tribal life offered in reality.

Three billion hours per week are spent gaming globally. Jane McGonigal's landmark analysis argues this is not laziness or escapism. It is people fulfilling psychological needs that reality has failed to provide. Clear goals. Immediate feedback. Escalating challenge matched to growing competence. Agency. Community. Purpose.

Jane McGonigal, Reality is Broken (2011)

The young man who joins a gang is not making an irrational choice. He is joining the closest available approximation of a tribe. Status by demonstrated toughness. Brotherhood. Clear roles. Loyalty that is real. Initiation. Purpose.

The system responds by removing him from his tribe, placing him in an institution that rewards fighting, and releasing him two years later having provided no alternative tribe, no legitimate role, no status pathway he can access. And then acts surprised when he goes back.

PROBLEM THREE

The Identity Trap

In 2001, criminologist Shadd Maruna published a study that should have changed everything. He conducted deep narrative interviews with two groups: persistent offenders who kept reoffending, and persistent offenders who had stopped — who had, in the criminological term, desisted.

The difference was not intelligence, opportunity, or even circumstance. It was the story they told about themselves.

Persistent offenders held what Maruna called condemnation scripts. They described themselves as fundamentally damaged, their futures as already written, their character as fixed. 'I'm just like that.' 'It's what I do.' 'I've always been this way.' The self-narrative was one of inevitable continuation.

Desisters held redemption scripts. They reframed their past — not denying it, but reinterpreting it. The difficult things they'd survived became evidence of resilience. Their history became preparation for a different future. 'I've been through all that, and it made me who I am, and who I am can do something different now.'

> ## *You cannot rehabilitate someone inside a narrative that says they are not redeemable. The story precedes the behaviour.*
>
> *Shadd Maruna, Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives (2001)*

This finding connects to one of the most replicated results in social psychology: Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, which demonstrated that people's behaviour is powerfully shaped not just by who they are but by what groups they belong to and what those groups are understood to be like. Assign someone to a group and they will begin to behave in accordance with that group's norms within hours.

Tajfel & Turner, An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict (1979)

A criminal record is an identity assignment. It does not merely describe past behaviour. It prescribes future identity. The system stamps a person — and then is astonished when they behave like what it stamped them as.

Baumeister and Leary's foundational 1995 meta-analysis established that belonging — genuine, stable membership in a caring group — is not a preference or a luxury. It is a fundamental human need of the same category as food and shelter. Its absence produces measurable cognitive distortions, emotional dysregulation, immune decline, and — critically — increased aggression.

Baumeister & Leary, The Need to Belong (1995), Psychological Bulletin

Isolation does not rehabilitate. It inflames. The cell is not neutral. It is an intervention in the wrong direction.

What Actually Makes People Stop

In 2003, criminologists John Laub and Robert Sampson published the results of one of the longest studies in the history of social science. Starting with data originally collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in the 1940s, they tracked 500 delinquent boys from Boston until they were in their seventies. They watched who stopped offending, who continued, and — crucially — what made the difference.

The turning points that produced desistance were consistent across the sample. Not prison. Not therapy. Not punishment.

Employment — particularly employment that involved a genuine relationship with an employer who invested in the person. Military service, which provided structure, brotherhood, and genuine belonging. Marriage, which created stakes, a community of accountability, and a role worth protecting.

The mechanism in each case was identical. These were not events that removed temptation. They were events that gave people something to be. An identity they valued. Relationships they did not want to damage. Stakes worth protecting.

> ***"I got shit to lose for the first time ever, bro."***

That sentence — from a man who had been through the system repeatedly from the age of eighteen, who learned as a child that the world was violent and the only safety was dominance — contains the entire theoretical framework in nine words. It is Laub and Sampson. It is Maruna. It is Baumeister and Leary. It is Junger. It is every piece of desistance research conducted in the last forty years.

You cannot deter someone who has nothing to protect. Give them something to protect, and you have done what fifty years of increasingly severe punishment could not.

Laub & Sampson, Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives (2003), Harvard University Press

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The Ancestral Architecture

It is worth stepping back further still — not to a study, but to a condition.

For the overwhelming majority of human evolutionary history, people lived in groups of between 50 and 150. Robin Dunbar's now-famous analysis of neocortical size across primate species predicted this number and found it confirmed in the archaeological and anthropological record: human beings can maintain genuine, trust-based social bonds with approximately 150 others.

Dunbar, Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates (1992), Journal of Human Evolution

In groups of this size, something remarkable happens. Free-riding — taking without contributing, harming without consequence — becomes socially costly in a way that no external enforcement is required to maintain. Everyone knows everyone. Reputation travels fast and far. Christopher Boehm's analysis of hunter-gatherer societies found that they actively, collectively suppressed dominance hierarchies through coalition enforcement. The group, not a legal system, maintained the social contract. And it worked.

Christopher Boehm, Hierarchy in the Forest (1999), Harvard University Press

Rates of lethal violence in ancestral-style small-group societies — while not zero — were managed not through punishment but through accountability embedded in relationship. You do not harm the person whose brother you will eat breakfast with tomorrow. You do not steal from the woman whose children play with yours. The community is the deterrent. Its presence is the mechanism.

Then humans scaled up. Cities of millions. Anonymity became the default. The web of mutual accountability dissolved. And then, puzzlingly, humans stood around wondering why people behaved as though they had no stake in each other.

You would not put eight million ants from different colonies in one container and expect harmony.

Domestic violence risk assessment literature offers a pointed datapoint here. Unemployment consistently appears at or near the top of risk factors in validated instruments such as the SARA and DA tools — not because economic stress causes violence directly, but because unemployment strips identity, role, belonging, and purpose simultaneously. Remove all four at once and you have removed everything that makes prosocial behaviour self-evidently worthwhile.

Campbell et al., Assessing Dangerousness (2007); Kropp & Hart, SARA Manual (2000)

> *Remove belonging, role, purpose, and identity simultaneously — and you have removed the entire architecture that makes not harming people feel like the obvious choice.*

Deterrence Through Addition

The framework that emerges from this body of research is not complicated. It is almost embarrassingly simple. It was, in fact, how human communities functioned for most of human history before they became too large and anonymous to remember how.

You do not deter through subtraction. You deter through addition.

Give a person identity. A name they chose or claim. A self-narrative that is not defined by what institutions have labelled them.

Give a person community. Three people who know them. Relationships that are real and warm and mutual. A network small enough to have genuine accountability built into it — Dunbar's architecture, deliberately reproduced.

Give a person role. Not a job in the extractive-tokens-for-survival sense. A function. Something the community needs done that only they can do. The drive to serve is ancient and biological and enormously powerful. It has been sitting in three billion young men playing Call of Duty waiting for someone to give it a real mission.

Give a person stakes. Something worth protecting. Something they built. Something they can lose.

These four things — identity, community, role, stakes — are what every turning point in the desistance literature provides. Employment with a genuine employer relationship. Military service. Marriage. All of them are delivery vehicles for the same four things.

> *The insight is not new. The missing piece was infrastructure — a way to deliver these four things deliberately, cheaply, and at scale, to the person standing outside the courtroom before the cycle has another chance to continue.*

Three people who vouch for you in person. A name you choose. A date you claim. An NFC ring you tap. Nine dollars.

That is identity made physical. Community made cryptographic. Belonging made verifiable. Participation made possible without a bank account, without a fixed address, without a history that the system has defined for you.

The VoteAussie vouching system is not a blockchain project. It is Dunbar's number made structural. It is Boehm's coalition accountability made digital. It is Maruna's redemption script given a credential. It is Laub and Sampson's turning point made accessible to the person who has never had a Wayno.

Not everyone needs it. Some people have the four things already. But the ones cycling through the system — the ones for whom deterrence through subtraction has been tried repeatedly and failed repeatedly — are almost universally people who have never had stable access to all four simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

Yeah, Boy

Here is what the evidence says, assembled across economics, evolutionary psychology, criminology, social neuroscience, anthropology, and fifty years of longitudinal data on real human lives:

Crime is not irrationality. It is adaptation to an environment that offers no better options.

Punishment does not deter the person who has nothing to protect. It confirms their narrative. It deepens their isolation. It trains them in the environment most likely to accelerate the behaviour you were trying to stop.

Young men are not uniquely broken. They are driven by the oldest and most powerful of social motivations: the need for a tribe, a mission, a role, a duty worthy of their energy. When legitimate structures fail to provide this, they construct their own. The gang. The yard. The crew. The server.

The thing that actually stops the cycle — in study after study, life after life — is not a better threat. It is a better offer. A door into a different identity. A relationship with a person who believes the new version is possible. Something real to lose.

Every broken system was a misguided attempt at something good. The policing wants safety. The prisons want order. The courts want fairness. But the mechanism chosen — subtraction from people who have nothing — cannot produce the outcome sought.

> *The answer was in the question the whole time. How do we stop people from harming each other? We give them each other to protect.*

Three people. Five words. A name. A date. Nine dollars.

Give first.

Everything else follows.

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