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Desistance and victim protection: a narrative review of intersecting pathways in criminal justice reform

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Abstract. This narrative review explores the complex relationship between desistance from crime and the evolving practices of victim protection, emphasizing the need for integrative approaches in contemporary criminal justice systems. While the concept of desistance—referring to the process through which individuals cease offending—has gained significant traction in rehabilitation-focused policies, it often remains disconnected from the discourse on victims' rights and needs. Drawing from recent interdisciplinary literature in criminology, restorative justice, and victimology, this review identifies key theoretical intersections, including the potential tensions and synergies between offender reintegration and victim safety. The analysis highlights how person-centered, trauma-informed, and community-based frameworks can foster both desistance and victim protection without compromising one for the other. Furthermore, the review examines the role of social support networks, institutional trust, and communication practices in managing these dual objectives. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a more balanced justice model that aligns offender reform with sustained victim empowerment and long-term societal resilience.

Keywords. Desistance from crime, victim protection, restorative justice, trauma-informed care, criminal justice reform

1. Introduction

In contemporary criminal justice reform, one of the most delicate and ethically charged tasks lies in balancing the support for offender desistance with the imperative of protecting victims. Desistance, broadly understood as the process through which individuals cease engaging in criminal behavior, is increasingly acknowledged not only as a personal journey but also as a socially and structurally mediated transformation. At the same time, victim protection has evolved from a reactive stance to a proactive, trauma-informed mandate that places safety, dignity, and empowerment at the core of service provision. Although both domains aim to reduce harm and promote reintegration, they often operate in parallel rather than in convergence. This narrative review seeks to explore these intersecting pathways, arguing for a more integrated, person-centered, and ethically grounded model of justice.

The social worker's role in this complex landscape is pivotal. Social workers are not only frontline practitioners offering psychosocial support, but also strategic actors in fostering reflective supervision, institutional learning, and ethical decision-making (Vîșcu & Rad, 2024;

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Vîșcu & Rad, 2025). As Viscu et al. (2025) emphasize, learning organizations within social work have the capacity to adapt practices in response to systemic challenges, including those that emerge at the intersection of offender rehabilitation and victim safeguarding. Indeed, a key characteristic of effective social work is the ability to maintain a dual focus: supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders, while upholding the non-negotiable rights and needs of victims.

This dual mandate is further complicated by the psychosocial realities that shape both desistance and victimhood. Offenders often emerge from marginalized or traumatized backgrounds themselves, requiring support strategies that are embedded in trust, reflection, and continuity (Cadariu & Rad, 2025). Conversely, victims' experiences with institutional responses can significantly influence their willingness to engage with justice processes. When supervision becomes abusive or dismissive, it not only undermines the desistance journey but may also retraumatize victims or distort the organizational culture meant to protect them (Vîșcu & Rad, 2024; Viscu & Rad, 2024).

Emerging models, such as Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), offer promising frameworks for integrating community, professional supervision, and restorative practices in ways that honor the complexities of both offender reform and victim empowerment (Clarke, Brown, & Völlm, 2015). Yet, these models are not without challenges, especially when applied in under-resourced, high-stress contexts where burnout, stress, and social disconnection remain pervasive (Gavrilă-Ardelean & Moldovan, 2014; Gavrilă-Ardeleana, 2016). Furthermore, the professional development of social workers, particularly in enhancing their reflective capacities and technological adaptability, remains essential for bridging the theoretical and practical gaps in this domain (Gavrilă-Ardelean & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the fragility of workplace learning and supervision systems, particularly in educational and counseling contexts, demanding new adaptive strategies and remote interventions (Rad et al., 2024). In the post-pandemic landscape, a renewed emphasis on supervision quality, emotional labor, and interprofessional collaboration has emerged as a condition for ethical and sustainable social work practice (Vîșcu & Rad, 2024).

Moreover, the intersecting identities of those involved—offenders, victims, professionals—require us to move beyond static categorizations. As Chiș et al. (2024) argue, psychological variables such as self-efficacy and interpersonal traits (e.g., agreeableness, introversion) are shaped not only by education but also by systemic opportunities for reflection and social connection. This insight is particularly relevant for understanding how desistance can be supported without erasing victim experiences, and how victim protection can be strengthened without perpetuating cycles of exclusion.

This paper adopts a narrative review methodology to synthesize key insights from criminology, victimology, social work, and restorative justice. Through this integrative lens, we examine the tensions, overlaps, and co-evolution of desistance and victim protection practices. Grounded in recent Romanian and international scholarship, the review highlights the need for systemic reflexivity, ethical supervision, and the reconfiguration of institutional paradigms to meet the dual imperatives of safety and transformation.

2. Theoretical foundations of desistance

Desistance has increasingly emerged as a key paradigm in contemporary criminal justice, offering a shift from punitive models toward those rooted in personal transformation, social reintegration, and psychological recovery. Rather than viewing criminal behavior solely through the lens of recidivism statistics, desistance research invites practitioners to examine the

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underlying conditions that foster human change, especially among individuals with complex trauma histories or prolonged contact with correctional systems (Mihăilă et al., 2025). For social workers, understanding the types, trajectories, and factors of desistance is essential to promoting client-centered, ethically grounded interventions.

2.1 Definitions and types of desistance

Desistance is not a singular or static event but a processual and dynamic shift in the individual's identity, cognition, behavior, and social engagement. Scholars often distinguish between three types of desistance: primary desistance, referring to an initial cessation of criminal acts; secondary desistance, indicating the internalization of a non-offender identity; and tertiary desistance, which involves societal recognition and validation of the individual's transformation (Anderson, 2016; Mihăilă et al., 2025).

While primary desistance may be externally motivated—such as avoiding arrest or complying with supervision—secondary and tertiary desistance are deeply rooted in shifts in self-concept, social roles, and community reintegration (Turanovic, 2019). In this sense, the desistance journey is not merely behavioral but ontological: a transformation of who one is and how one is seen.

2.2 Life-course criminology and turning points

Life-course criminology provides a robust framework for understanding desistance as a temporal and transitional process. It emphasizes "turning points"—life events or social experiences that create discontinuity with past behavior, such as stable employment, parenting, or significant relationships (Weaver, 2014). These transitions are not deterministic but can open opportunities for change, provided they are supported by systems of care, meaning, and belonging.

Moreover, victimization itself may act as a complex turning point. For some individuals, prior victim experiences serve as catalysts for empathic transformation or moral reevaluation (Turanovic, 2019; Meyer, 2016). For others, unresolved trauma may become a risk factor for further harm to self or others, particularly when institutional responses are dismissive or re-traumatizing (Runcan et al., 2025). Thus, the desistance process must be situated within a life-course framework that accounts for both protective and risk-laden transitions.

2.3 Psychological, social, and structural factors influencing desistance

A growing body of evidence underscores that desistance is not simply a matter of willpower or individual responsibility—it is deeply influenced by psychological well-being, social capital, and structural opportunity. Psychological variables such as self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and resilience significantly shape one’s capacity to disengage from crime (Chiș et al., 2024; Demeter et al., 2024). Mental health, especially when unaddressed, can act as a barrier to both insight and behavioral change.

Social support—whether from family, peers, professionals, or community actors—is equally crucial. Models such as Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) illustrate how relational engagement and community scaffolding can humanize the reintegration process and reduce relapse risk (Clarke, Brown, & Völlm, 2015). At the same time, institutional support systems, including trauma-informed care and reflective supervision, play a critical role in sustaining motivation and accountability throughout the desistance journey (Cadariu & Rad, 2025; Runcan et al., 2025).

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Structural conditions, such as poverty, discrimination, and labor exclusion, also constrain desistance trajectories (Runcan, Marici, & Rad, 2024). For NEET individuals—those not in employment, education, or training—the absence of meaningful engagement increases the risk of social disconnection and reoffending. Desistance-oriented interventions must therefore address not only individual deficits but also the systemic inequities that perpetuate cycles of harm (Runcan et al., 2024).

2.4 Current models and critiques

Seminal models of desistance, such as McNeill's narrative and relational approach or Maruna's "redemption script" framework, argue that identity reconstruction lies at the heart of lasting change. These models underscore the need for co-produced, empathetic, and dialogic interventions that respect individual agency while fostering mutual responsibility (Anderson, 2016; Meléndez Peretó, 2015). From a social work perspective, this aligns with strengths-based practice and narrative therapies, which center the client's lived experience as a site of meaning-making and empowerment.

Nevertheless, critiques of desistance research caution against over-romanticizing the process or minimizing the potential risk to victims. For instance, Weaver (2014) emphasizes the ethical tension between public protection and individual change, particularly when reintegration may intersect with victim retraumatization. Similarly, Williams and Goodman (2013) advocate for an integrated framework where victim needs are not overshadowed by offender rehabilitation agendas.

Assisted desistance models, increasingly employed in correctional settings, aim to scaffold internal motivation with external support structures—offering a practical synthesis of theory and implementation (de Vel-Palumbo et al., 2023). However, these models require robust ethical oversight and interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly when working with populations with histories of violence or coercive control.

In sum, desistance is best understood not as a linear process but as a socially contingent, psychologically complex, and ethically charged transformation. For practitioners in social work and criminal justice, this demands a commitment to relational ethics, trauma-informed care, and systemic advocacy. It also necessitates ongoing dialogue with victim protection paradigms, which we explore in the following section.

3. Contemporary approaches to victim protection

The landscape of victim protection within criminal justice systems has evolved significantly over the past few decades, transitioning from a secondary concern to a core principle of justice policy and practice. This evolution reflects a growing recognition that the experiences, voices, and needs of victims are not only morally relevant but central to fostering social trust, reducing harm, and ensuring sustainable pathways to offender desistance. Nonetheless, the practical realization of victim protection remains complex and contested, particularly when framed within the dynamic tensions between rehabilitation, punishment, and public safety.

3.1 Evolution of victims' rights in criminal justice

Historically, the criminal justice system marginalized the role of victims, positioning them primarily as passive witnesses in a process centered around state-offender dynamics. However, legal reforms across jurisdictions—particularly since the 1980s—have sought to reposition victims as active rights-bearers. This shift is underpinned by restorative justice

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principles and human rights frameworks that advocate for victim participation, acknowledgment, and redress (Birgden, 2015; Healy, 2012).

Within the desistance paradigm, this evolution has introduced new ethical imperatives. As McNeill (2006) noted, any legitimate process of offender reintegration must be grounded in accountability to those harmed. Victim protection, therefore, cannot be reduced to risk minimization—it must encompass emotional safety, recognition, and the possibility of social reparation. In this context, the justice system is called to "advise, assist and befriend" both parties (Healy, 2012), while carefully navigating their divergent trajectories and needs.

3.2 Trauma-informed care and victim support services

A defining feature of contemporary victim protection is the incorporation of trauma-informed care (TIC) into criminal justice and social work practices. This model recognizes that many victims—especially of intimate partner violence (IPV), childhood abuse, or sexual violence—carry the enduring psychological, relational, and physiological imprints of trauma (Walker, Bowen, & Brown, 2013; Gålnander, 2019). Trauma-informed approaches emphasize safety, trust, empowerment, and collaboration, creating environments where victims are not re-traumatized by institutional responses.

Moreover, the narratives of victims themselves reveal the long-term impact of violence on self-concept and agency. As Walker et al. (2018) found, the process of psychological recovery and empowerment for IPV survivors often mirrors desistance pathways in offenders, requiring community validation, self-compassion, and space for narrative reconstruction. Recognizing this parallel is essential in designing victim services that do not isolate or essentialize victims, but instead promote post-traumatic growth and active citizenship (Emery et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, trauma-informed care also faces challenges when intersecting with offender rehabilitation. Victims may fear perceived leniency in justice responses or experience ongoing psychological insecurity when offenders are reintegrated into their communities. Therefore, trauma-informed victim support must be matched with systemic safeguards, transparent communication, and, where appropriate, restorative practices that prioritize victim consent and readiness (Cluley & Marston, 2018).

3.3 Risk assessment and safety planning

One of the most operationalized aspects of victim protection today is risk assessment and safety planning, especially in cases of domestic violence and stalking. Risk assessments aim to determine the likelihood of reoffending or further harm, guiding legal decisions and resource allocation. Instruments used in this domain typically include both actuarial tools and dynamic indicators (Walker et al., 2013).

However, the predictive nature of risk assessment must be carefully balanced with the victim's lived experience and contextual knowledge. As Ward (2017) and Polaschek (2017) argue, an overemphasis on static risk factors can obscure the protective dimensions of resilience, informal social control, and community support. Moreover, women's safety decisions are often shaped by economic dependency, stigma, and relational ambivalence—not solely by perceived risk (Rutter & Barr, 2021).

Effective safety planning must therefore adopt a holistic, individualized, and culturally sensitive approach, involving victims in their own protection plans while also coordinating multi-agency responses. From a desistance perspective, this requires clear boundaries, continuous monitoring, and a nuanced understanding of how proximity—physical or

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symbolic—can retraumatize victims or disrupt their healing process (Kazemian & Maruna, 2009).

3.4 Gaps and critiques in current victim protection frameworks

Despite advances in policy and practice, victim protection frameworks continue to face significant conceptual and operational limitations. First, the system often adopts a binary victim-offender distinction, neglecting the fluidity and overlap in these categories. Research has increasingly shown that individuals with offending histories may also be victims of serious interpersonal and structural harm—what DeCamp, Zaykowski, and Lunn (2018) describe as "victim–offender trajectories." This insight challenges simplistic moral narratives and underscores the need for more integrated, trauma-aware interventions across the justice continuum.

Second, victim protection mechanisms often rely heavily on criminal justice procedures, which can be alienating, retraumatizing, or ineffective. For example, many survivors of IPV disengage from legal proceedings due to fear, shame, or lack of faith in institutional support (Walker et al., 2013; Gålnander, 2019). In such cases, restorative models or community-based supports may offer more accessible and empowering alternatives—provided they are implemented ethically and with full victim consent (Meléndez Peretó, 2015).

Third, social stigma—especially around gender, disability, or cultural identity—can undermine both victim advocacy and offender reintegration. Green (2019) notes how serious victimization intersects with disabled masculine identity, shaping not only one's vulnerability but also the pathways through which desistance and identity reconstruction occur. These complexities highlight the importance of intersectionality in policy design, avoiding one-size-fits-all models of victimhood or risk.

Finally, critiques have emerged regarding the technocratic overreach of risk management systems, which can deskill practitioners and reduce victims' experiences to algorithmic outputs. As Cluley and Marston (2018) warn, the ethical core of justice work risks erosion when we fail to "bear witness" to individual stories and instead rely solely on procedural abstraction.

4. Intersections between desistance and victim protection

The relationship between desistance and victim protection presents a significant ethical and operational challenge for contemporary criminal justice systems. Too often, these two domains have been treated as distinct, or even oppositional: the former emphasizing rehabilitation and reintegration, the latter emphasizing safety, justice, and recovery. However, a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship suggests that these processes are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing—when managed through a trauma-informed, person-centered, and structurally reflexive approach (McNeill, 2006; Mihăilă et al., 2025; Runcan et al., 2025).

At the core of this intersection lies a shared aspiration: to reduce harm and promote sustainable change. Both desistance and victim recovery involve processes of identity reconstruction, trust-building, and social reintegration. Yet, the success of these processes is often mediated by systemic structures—probation, social services, mental health care, and community resources—that must be sensitively aligned to avoid retraumatizing victims or destabilizing the fragile progress of those desisting from crime (Kazemian & Maruna, 2009; Birgden, 2015).

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4.1 Conceptual tensions: offender reintegration vs. victim safety

Perhaps the most visible tension in this intersection arises from the perceived conflict between supporting offender reintegration and ensuring victim safety. Victims may feel neglected or endangered when offenders are offered rehabilitative opportunities that appear to eclipse accountability. This tension is especially salient in cases of intimate partner violence or sexual offending, where physical proximity and psychological trauma continue long after formal sentencing (Walker et al., 2013; Gålnander, 2019).

However, such a dichotomy may be overly simplistic. Research by Walker, Bowen, and Brown (2013) shows that true desistance from violence is often supported by acknowledging the harm done—not only to the self but to others. This recognition process is vital in transforming antisocial cognition and promoting empathic insight. Therapeutic models of desistance that incorporate victim perspectives and restorative dialogue, when appropriate and consented to, may contribute to deeper, more meaningful change (Meléndez Peretó, 2015; Anderson, 2016).

Nonetheless, the inclusion of victims must never be instrumentalized. As Cluley and Marston (2018) warn, ethical supervision must avoid using victims to validate offender progress. Instead, parallel and complementary systems of support must be designed, where both parties are respected as autonomous and complex agents.

4.2 Restorative justice as a bridging paradigm

Restorative justice (RJ) offers one of the most promising conceptual frameworks for bridging desistance and victim protection. By emphasizing accountability, dialogue, and reparation, RJ shifts the justice paradigm from punitive retribution to relational healing. This model is particularly effective when integrated into broader desistance-oriented programs, such as Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), which involve community members in supporting the reintegration of individuals with histories of sexual offending (Clarke, Brown, & Völlm, 2015).

RJ frameworks, however, are not universally applicable. They require voluntary participation, clear power boundaries, and skilled facilitation, particularly when dealing with highly traumatized victims. Yet, when carefully implemented, they offer avenues for moral repair and acknowledgment that traditional justice systems often fail to provide (Ward, 2017; Polaschek, 2017).

Social workers are crucial in this process—not only as facilitators of restorative dialogue but as ethical anchors, ensuring that victim voices are neither erased nor manipulated in the name of offender progress (Cadariu & Rad, 2025; Runcan et al., 2025).

4.3 Trust, Institutional Communication, and Professional Supervision

Trust is a shared foundation for both desistance and victim recovery. For those desisting, trust in professionals, institutions, and themselves is essential for sustaining motivation and reauthoring their life story. For victims, trust in the justice system, social services, and community safety mechanisms is vital to rebuilding agency and restoring a sense of security (Rutter & Barr, 2021; Gålnander, 2019).

Breakdowns in trust—caused by procedural opacity, retraumatizing contact, or uncoordinated services—can derail both processes. This underscores the necessity for integrated communication practices, where probation officers, counselors, and victim advocates work collaboratively rather than in silos. Vîșcu and Rad (2024) emphasize the role of reflective

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and strategic supervision in creating learning organizations within social work that are equipped to manage such complexity with ethical consistency.

Moreover, workplace learning disruptions, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted the fragility of these support systems. Rad et al. (2024) argue for greater adaptability and ethical awareness in professional education and supervision, especially in times of crisis.

4.4 Shared psychosocial mechanisms of change

Research in psychological and developmental criminology points to common mechanisms that underpin both desistance and victim recovery: narrative identity formation, self-efficacy, social connectedness, and the experience of being heard or "witnessed" (Anderson, 2016; Chiș et al., 2024). For instance, desistance is facilitated by protective factors such as self-compassion, informal social control, and meaningful relationships (Emery et al., 2023; Ward, 2017). These same factors are essential for victims to process trauma and regain a sense of dignity.

Indeed, both victims and desisting individuals must navigate the tension between past harm and future hope. In the case of female offenders who are also survivors of violence, identity becomes especially fragmented. Meyer (2016) and Green (2019) demonstrate how victimization and offending co-exist in ways that challenge binary models of justice. This calls for a trauma-informed, intersectional approach that centers lived experience rather than categorical assumptions.

In this regard, ecological momentary interventions (EMIs) may offer innovative pathways for supporting clients in real time—whether victims or desisters—by delivering therapeutic support in contextually relevant moments (Cadariu & Rad, 2025). Such approaches not only personalize care but also empower individuals to internalize change through active self-monitoring and reflection.

5. Integrated Frameworks: person-centered and community-based approaches

The growing recognition that desistance and victim protection share psychological, social, and institutional foundations calls for the design and implementation of integrated justice frameworks—those that are both person-centered and community-based. Such models emphasize the dignity, agency, and relational embeddedness of all individuals involved in justice processes. They require not only theoretical coherence but operational integration across criminal justice, social services, and mental health systems. At the center of this integration lies the role of the social worker: both as a relational guide and an ethical mediator.

Community-based interventions have gained substantial traction in supporting desistance while maintaining public safety and victim protection. Programs such as Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) embody this ethos by fostering sustained engagement with formerly incarcerated individuals through community volunteers, trained professionals, and survivors' advocacy input (Clarke, Brown, & Völlm, 2015). These models reject the isolationist tendencies of punitive incarceration and instead promote relational accountability—a form of responsibility grounded in human connection and community reciprocity.

Such approaches are especially valuable for individuals convicted of sexual offenses, where stigma, fear, and systemic barriers hinder reintegration. Importantly, CoSA and similar models do not bypass victim needs; rather, they are designed to ensure that community reintegration is conditional upon recognition of harm, restoration efforts, and safety assurances. This shared ethical ground can foster broader social resilience (Ward, 2017; Polaschek, 2017).

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Social workers are uniquely positioned to bridge systems that have traditionally operated in isolation. As Vîșcu and Rad (2024) argue, supervision in social work must move beyond linear models of oversight to embrace strategic, reflective, and integrative roles. These roles allow practitioners to mediate complex ethical dilemmas—for instance, when offender self-determination collides with community fear or victim retraumatization.

A learning organization perspective further strengthens this integrative potential. As shown by Viscu et al. (2025), institutions that foster reflexivity, mutual learning, and ethical inquiry are better equipped to adapt to evolving justice challenges. Whether through supervision, trauma-informed case management, or advocacy, social workers operate at the nexus of clinical insight and structural change (Runcan et al., 2025).

Integrated frameworks must also adopt a trauma-informed systems approach, in which all stakeholders—offenders, victims, professionals, and community members—are recognized as potentially impacted by trauma, stress, and systemic violence. This model transcends individual casework by embedding trauma awareness into organizational cultures, policies, and routines (Runcan, Runcan, Rad, & Măduța, 2023).

For example, Cadariu and Rad (2025) propose ecological momentary interventions (EMIs) that operate in real-time to reinforce well-being, self-regulation, and client agency. While primarily designed for desisting individuals, such interventions are equally applicable to victims navigating recovery, as they align with neurobiological and psychosocial recovery processes.

Moreover, integrated trauma-informed frameworks acknowledge intersecting vulnerabilities, such as gender-based violence, disability, and social stigma. Studies by Gålnander (2019) and Green (2019) demonstrate how female offenders with histories of victimization face compounded barriers to desistance and social legitimacy. Without a cross-cutting trauma lens, both victims and desisters are at risk of being misunderstood, mislabeled, or underserved.

Another key element of integrated frameworks is transparent and ethical communication, both within and between institutions. Rad et al. (2024) highlight how disruptions in workplace learning and communication—exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic—can undermine the relational infrastructure needed to support ethical practice in both offender and victim work. Rebuilding these infrastructures requires more than technological investment; it calls for relational leadership, emotionally intelligent supervision, and interprofessional empathy.

Digital tools may also play a supportive role in enabling adaptive, real-time monitoring and engagement, particularly through platforms designed for client feedback, case coordination, and psychological support. However, Runcan et al. (2025) caution against relying exclusively on AI or algorithmic decision-making without sustained human oversight. Ethical digital integration must preserve narrative, meaning, and accountability, all of which are core to both desistance and victim protection.

6. Barriers to integration

Despite the growing scholarly consensus on the interdependence of desistance and victim protection, the operationalization of integrated frameworks remains constrained by multiple and interlocking barriers. These barriers are not solely logistical but often epistemic, political, and cultural, rooted in long-standing divisions within justice and social service systems. One of the most enduring challenges lies in the institutional siloing of offender management and victim services. These two domains have evolved along parallel, often

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uncoordinated paths—one rooted in criminological rehabilitation, the other in trauma and victimology. As a result, policies, funding streams, and professional mandates tend to be fragmented, with little incentive for collaborative action or shared outcome indicators (McNeill, 2006; Birgden, 2015).

This siloed architecture is reinforced by differing epistemologies and risk logics: while desistance frameworks often emphasize hope, growth, and transformation, victim protection tends to foreground risk, safety, and prevention. These are not incompatible aims, but in practice, they are too often treated as mutually exclusive. For example, restorative practices may be resisted not because of their theoretical shortcomings, but due to a lack of structural safeguards or clear protocols for victim consent, power asymmetry, and reparation (Meléndez Peretó, 2015; Cluley & Marston, 2018).

Further compounding this fragmentation are public perceptions and political pressures that shape justice policy, particularly around high-profile or emotionally charged cases involving sexual or intimate partner violence. Media narratives often construct offenders as irredeemable threats and victims as fixed identities in need of paternalistic protection. While such representations may mobilize public sympathy, they also risk flattening the complexity of real-life cases, where individuals frequently move between roles of victimization and harm (DeCamp et al., 2018; Meyer, 2016; Gålnander, 2019). This polarization fosters punitive political climates in which policy-makers are reluctant to invest in rehabilitative programs that may be perceived as lenient, even when such programs demonstrably reduce recidivism and support victim recovery.

These dynamics create implementation challenges at the frontline level. Practitioners—including social workers, probation officers, and victim advocates—are often tasked with navigating conflicting mandates without the institutional support or training necessary to integrate them. While supervision models that foster reflective and ethical practice have been shown to mitigate practitioner burnout and role conflict (Vîșcu & Rad, 2024), many professionals remain constrained by bureaucratic workloads, time limitations, and unclear role expectations. In some cases, practitioners may even exhibit resistance to integration, grounded in ideological commitments, organizational inertia, or fear of increased responsibility without commensurate resources (Walker et al., 2013; Healy, 2012).

Moreover, ethical tensions can emerge when practitioners are placed in positions where supporting offender reintegration might conflict with their perceived duty to protect or advocate for victims. This dilemma is particularly pronounced in small or rural communities, where service networks are limited, and the visibility of both victims and offenders complicates confidentiality, neutrality, and continuity of care (Ward, 2017; Rutter & Barr, 2021).

From a systems perspective, the lack of shared communication protocols and interagency data infrastructures further hinders collaboration. As Rad et al. (2024) emphasize, disruptions in institutional learning and cross-sector communication—exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic—have shown how fragile professional networks can become in times of crisis. Without robust supervisory frameworks and institutional cultures that prioritize learning, transparency, and psychological safety, integration efforts may remain aspirational rather than actionable (Viscu et al., 2025; Runcan et al., 2025).

Finally, there is an emerging concern about the technologization of care in justice contexts, particularly through AI-driven risk assessment tools or digital supervision platforms. While these tools offer efficiency and predictive power, they may lack the narrative sensitivity and ethical discernment required to balance victim dignity with offender transformation (Runcan et al., 2025). Overreliance on such tools risks displacing the very human relationships

that are foundational to both desistance and victim recovery (Anderson, 2016; Emery et al., 2023).

In sum, the barriers to integrating desistance and victim protection frameworks are multifaceted and deeply embedded in the architecture of contemporary justice systems. Overcoming them requires more than programmatic innovation; it demands a cultural shift toward ethical collaboration, systemic reflexivity, and shared ownership of justice outcomes. These transformations are the focus of the next section, which explores guiding principles and policy recommendations for building a more balanced and humane justice model.

7. Conclusions

This narrative review has explored the intersecting trajectories of desistance from crime and victim protection, revealing both the tensions and synergies inherent in current criminal justice reform. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in criminology, psychology, and social work, as well as contemporary studies on supervision, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice, the analysis has emphasized the urgent need to transcend siloed approaches. Instead, it advocates for ethically grounded, person-centered, and systemically integrated frameworks that can support both the offender's journey toward desistance and the victim's process of recovery and empowerment.

Among the key findings is the recognition that desistance is not merely a behavioral shift but a psychosocial and relational transformation that unfolds over time. This process requires stability, identity reformation, and supportive social contexts—factors often disrupted by institutional fragmentation and punitive risk management strategies (McNeill, 2006; Mihăilă et al., 2025). Similarly, effective victim protection demands more than procedural safeguards; it requires trauma-informed engagement, continuity of care, and recognition of victims as active agents in their recovery (Walker et al., 2013; Meyer, 2016).

Crucially, the review has demonstrated that both desistance and victim support depend on shared psychosocial mechanisms: narrative identity, trust, informal social control, and the presence of meaningful relationships. Models such as Circles of Support and Accountability (Clarke, Brown, & Völlm, 2015) illustrate the potential of community-based frameworks that center human dignity and mutual accountability. Social workers—positioned at the intersection of these processes—play a vital role in translating these principles into everyday practice through reflective supervision, ecological interventions, and advocacy for system-level change (Vîșcu & Rad, 2024; Cadariu & Rad, 2025).

From a theoretical standpoint, this review contributes to an emerging paradigm that reconceptualizes justice as a relational and developmental process rather than a binary opposition of punishment versus protection. It calls attention to the limitations of static risk-based models, proposing instead dynamic and responsive frameworks that account for trauma, structural inequality, and lived experience (Birgden, 2015; Runcan et al., 2025). Practically, the review underscores the need for multi-level collaboration, continuous professional development, and ethically informed supervision structures that enable integrated practice across sectors (Rad et al., 2024; Viscu et al., 2025).

Looking ahead, future research must engage in longitudinal and life-course studies that map the evolving experiences of both desisting individuals and victims, particularly in under-researched populations and post-release contexts. Culturally grounded models are also essential to capture the specificities of justice processes across different social, national, and institutional landscapes (Emery et al., 2023; Gålnander, 2019). Furthermore, system-level innovation is

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needed to build interoperable infrastructures, shared ethical guidelines, and participatory mechanisms that genuinely include both victims and offenders in justice redesign.

In conclusion, the path toward a balanced justice model is not linear nor without complexity. It requires courage to challenge entrenched paradigms, humility to center lived experience, and creativity to design systems that honor both healing and accountability. Through interdisciplinary engagement and reflective practice, such a vision is not only necessary—it is possible.

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