Desistance research has typically focused on general and violent offending (Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 2003), although recently the field has turned to the study of desistance in sexual offenders (e.g. Farmer, McAlinden & Maruna, 2015). Various correlates of desistance for sexual offenders have been suggested (De Vries Robbe, Mann, Maruna & Thornton, 2014) and there is currently a theoretical debate about whether sexual offenders need to create a new identity in order to desist (Harris, 2016). The aim of this prospective, longitudinal research was to explore the early desistance process in a group of men who have previously been convicted of a sexual offence (s), and are now living in the community, some of whom were supported by Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA). COSA is a community-based project that works to reduce sexual offending by forming a ‘Circle’ of trained community volunteers around a previously convicted sexual offender in order to support and monitor his behavior. Therefore, an additional aim of the project was to investigate the role that COSA plays in the desistance process. Further to the above, a particular emphasis was given to the role of sexual interests in children and how this is managed in the desistance process.

Narrative/interview and psychometric data (based on potential desistance factors for sexual offending) were collected at two times points (approximately 12 months apart) from two groups of men in England, UK; a group engaging in a Circle (n=40) and a sexual offender comparison group (n=18) on Probation Supervision in the community but not engaging in a Circles. A third comparison group of violent offenders on Probation Supervision (n=20) was also utilized to explore whether the issues around desistance faced by sexual offenders are different to non-sexual offenders.

The narrative data were analyzed using themed analysis (NVivo 10) and Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al 2007). LIWC is a computerized text analysis program that counts the emotional, cognitive and structural components present in written and verbal speech. The psychometric data were analyzed for pre to post change between and within groups.
For this presentation the results of these analyses will be presented with a focus on relating the findings to the recent debate around identity, and how COSA impacts on the proposed correlates of desistance for men who have sexually offended.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**

- Provide an overview of the recent literature and current theoretical debate around whether the creation of a new identity is crucial to the desistance process in sexual offenders.
  - Following the presentation delegates will be able to outline two key papers which contribute towards the debate on whether sexual offenders need to create a new identity in order to desist.
- Present the results and theoretical implications of a three-year prospective study on desistance in sexual offenders, including both qualitative and quantitative data.
  - By the end of the presentation delegates will be able to describe four themes relating to how sexual offenders manage their sexual interest in children during early desistance.
- Consider the role of COSA, particularly how it impacts on the potential desistance factors outlined in the research and the issue of new identity formation.
  - Delegates will be able to label three factors that are identified as being relevant to the desistance process in sexual offenders who are engaged in a Circle.

**Desistance from Sexual Offending: Life Narratives of Recidivism and Redemption**

Danielle Arlanda Harris, Ph.D., San Jose State University

Desistance refers to the slowing down, de-escalation, or cessation of offending. For two centuries it has been observed by criminologists as a natural human process for the majority of those who break the law but the field of research on sexual aggression has only recently begun to investigate this phenomenon. The widespread and persistent belief that sex offenders are destined to reoffend (Göbbels, et al., 2012; Harris & Cudmore, 2015; Laws & Ward, 2011; Willis, Levenson & Ward, 2010) has aided the development of an entire industry which is now consumed with the assessment of risk and the prediction of recidivism. To that end, a slew of legislation now exists that aims to control and manage the post-custody behaviors (not to mention the literal, day-to-day, physical movement) of (mostly) men convicted of sexual offenses (especially against children) (Harris, 2015).

The present study utilizes a large sample of men incarcerated or civilly committed for sexual offenses and released to the street in the 1990s. It is the first to explore the narrative differences (revealed during in-depth life history interviews) between the 11 men who reoffended sexually and are back in custody and the 60 men who continue to live offense-free lives in the community. The main focus is on understanding the specific
experiences and local life circumstances that shaped each participant’s release and reentry. The personal and offense characteristics of the participants are described and compared, and qualitative content analysis is employed to explore and explain their differential life narratives of redemption and recidivism.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**

- Participants will be able to recognize the negative impact of sexual offender specific public policy
- Participants will be able to describe the factors that correlate with desistance as well as those that correlate with recidivism.
- Participants will be able to suggest the kinds of protective factors that stand to have the biggest impact on desistance from offending.