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Getting Traction on Positive Youth Justice:

Prosocial Identity as a Promising Target for Intervention

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Abstract

The Positive Youth Justice (PYJ) paradigm emphasizes building youths' strengths and prosocial attributes to promote healthy development and desistance from antisocial behavior. Despite broad support for PYJ, direct application of the model to juvenile justice interventions has been limited by its multitude of components and global targets. In this paper, we chart an innovative pathway from theory to intervention that centers on promoting prosocial identity, or the extent to which young people view themselves as prosocial. We synthesize theory and evidence from developmental science and criminology to demonstrate that—with individual effort and environmental support—a youth's identity can be shifted in the prosocial direction to promote desistance from antisocial behavior. Our intervention framework specifies three targets for change: *content* of the future possible self (promoting hope for a future prosocial self, balanced by fear of a future antisocial self), prosocial identity *prominence* (importance to the self), and prosocial identity *validation* (confidence that the self can be achieved). To realize the promise of this framework, researchers and practitioners can build consensus on measures of prosocial identity, assess the extent to which identity changes in response to existing strengths-based services, and further establish the protective utility of prosocial identity. Interventions that directly target identity content, prominence, or validation should also be tested for their impact on antisocial behavior. We expect this identity-based approach to add value to existing services. Understanding that shifts in identity are both possible and matter, can help chart new pathways for promoting positive youth development.

Keywords: positive youth justice, prosocial identity, youth and juveniles, antisocial behavior, intervention

Getting Traction on Positive Youth Justice:

Prosocial Identity as a Promising Target for Intervention

Policymakers and practitioners are increasingly embracing Positive Youth Justice paradigms (PYJ; Butts et al., 2010; Haines & Case, 2018) for juvenile justice interventions. Unlike traditional paradigms that emphasize reducing youth's deficits and risk factors for reoffending, PYJ paradigms emphasize building on youth's strengths, developing their prosocial attributes and assets, and providing them with opportunities that can promote both desistance from antisocial behavior and overall healthy development (Butts, 2014; Butts et al., 2010; Haines & Case, 2018; Catalano et al., 2004).

Despite broad support for PYJ, direct application of these paradigms to juvenile justice interventions has been limited. It is challenging to translate PYJ into innovative, effective, and efficient interventions because the general paradigm is associated with a multitude of target constructs and components. According to Catalano et al (2004), "Positive Youth Development" programs target one or more of *fifteen* different constructs—including bonding, resilience, competency, self-determination, clear and positive identity, and prosocial norms and involvement. There is no empirical guidance on which of these constructs most strongly promotes desistance. In fact, there is not even consistent evidence that youths' strengths (or promotive factors) add value to their deficits (or risk factors), in predicting whether they reoffend (Barnes-Lee & Petkus, 2023). Although a leading PYJ paradigm targets only two constructs (learning/doing and attaching/belonging), it proposes that both diffuse assets be built across six different domains (i.e., work, education, relationships, community, health, creativity/art; Butts et al., 2010). As Butts (2014) acknowledged, this "requires justice professionals to look for those resources outside of their own agencies and budgets" (p. 2) and necessitates a system-wide

approach that is “complicated to manage” (p. 4). In short, it is unclear what a PYJ intervention is—let alone, whether a PYJ intervention is effective.

To begin translating PYJ into innovative interventions that truly add value to juvenile justice, one approach is to unpack and investigate one particularly promising developmental construct and theoretical mechanism of change at a time. After all, “having too many goals and principles is akin to having none” (Research & Evaluation Center, 2023). In this paper, we do exactly that—by charting a pathway from theory to intervention that centers on identity and promoting the extent to which young people view themselves as prosocial. A core purpose of adolescence is for a young person to establish their own identity and differentiate themselves from their parents or caregivers, as they gradually transform into an adult. As young people who are involved in the justice system cultivate their sense of self and place in the world, the process introduces both challenges *and* unique opportunities for intervention. We believe that—with individual effort and environmental support—a youth’s identity can be shifted in the prosocial direction to promote desistance from antisocial behavior.

We define prosocial identity as a domain-specific sense of self that focuses on the degree to which one is “prosocial” (Na & Paternoster, 2019; Paternoster & Bushway, 2008; Rocque et al., 2016). “Prosocial”, in turn, can be conceptualized as a bipolar dimension that is anchored by antisocial (deviating from social norms and disregarding the rights of others) versus prosocial (supporting the social order and promoting others’ welfare) tendencies (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2015; Eisenberg et al., 2015, p. 610; Pfattheicher et al., 2022). Theoretically, prosocial identity influences not only our internal processing, but also our external behavior. According to leading psychological perspectives, identity motivates, directs, and regulates our behavior—so we behave in accordance with what would be socially expected for

our salient identities (Stryker & Serpe, 1994), and prefer identity-congruent behavior over identity-incongruent behavior (Berkman et al., 2017a, 2017b; Oyserman, 2007). To the extent that a young person's dominant identity is prosocial, they will prefer conventional or prosocial behavior over antisocial behavior.

In keeping with this premise, compelling theories in criminology posit that shifts toward prosocial identity are a core mechanism of desistance from crime, among justice-involved adults (e.g., Paternoster & Bushway, 2008; Maruna, 2001). Shifts in identity and identity development are directly relevant to the period of adolescence, which typically begins with the onset of puberty (age 9 to 12) and ends when one begins taking on adult roles and responsibilities (age 18 to early 20's) (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Yeager et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the central role that prosocial identity could play in intervening with justice-involved youth has been underexplored.

In this paper, we offer a framework for identity-based intervention with these youth that is based on a synthesis of relevant criminological-, developmental-, and clinical science. Our intervention and policy scope involves early-to-mid adolescents who have had contact with the justice system and can be referred to treatment services in community or detention settings, under the auspices of either the child welfare or juvenile justice system (including mental health diversion; see Skeem et al., 2014). First, we review theories and evidence across these disciplines that collectively indicate that prosocial identity is a promising intervention target for juvenile justice programs. Then, we present a conceptual framework for intervention that is adapted from Oyserman's (2007) and others' work to specify three targets for change: the *content* of future possible selves (i.e., promoting hope for a future prosocial self, balanced by fear of a future antisocial self), prosocial identity *prominence* (or importance to the self), and prosocial identity *validation* (or confidence that the self can be achieved). We conclude by discussing the

implications of this identity-based approach for future research and practice, including steps for applying and validating the approach to begin translating PYJ into some feasible, innovative, and effective juvenile justice interventions.

Prosocial Identity as a Promising Intervention Target

In this section, we integrate theories and evidence across different disciplines to offer three main reasons for starting with prosocial identity, as a particularly promising developmental construct that can inform juvenile justice programs. First, despite different operationalizations of the construct, emerging evidence across domains indicates that prosocial identity protects youth against antisocial behavior. Second, compelling theories in criminology prioritize the role of identity change as a core mechanism of desistance. Third, multidisciplinary theories and evidence suggest that identity is a developmentally "wise" intervention target for adolescents.

Evidence that Prosocial Identity Protects Youth Against Antisocial Behavior

Although research on the relationship between prosocial identity and youth's antisocial behavior is relatively sparse, the results of several prospective studies suggest that prosocial identity protects against antisocial behavior—even though these studies involve different samples (unreferred youth, justice-involved youth, etc.) and various operationalizations of prosocial identity (single items, proxy measures, or validated scales). It is encouraging that the predictive utility of prosocial identity seems to generalize across a "heterogeneity of irrelevancies" like differences in measurement (Shadish, 1995), even though more research that uses validated measures of prosocial identity would be ideal.

Three groups of studies provide encouraging evidence. The first group of studies operationalized prosocial identity as either the reverse of the extent to which a youth viewed themself as a "troublemaker" and "delinquent" (Na & Paternoster, 2019), or the extent to which

a youth viewed themself as being a conventionally "good person"—or law-abiding, trustful, honest, and not mean (Rocque et al., 2016). Using data from a large representative sample of 8th grade Korean youth who were surveyed every year for five years, Na & Paternoster (2019) examined the within-person association between changes in prosocial identity (see above) and changes in violent behavior, using the subsample of youth who had been involved in at least one violent incident (N=1,357, *M* age=13.8 at baseline). The authors found that a one-unit increase in the prosocial identity scale (range=1-5) was related to a 19 percent decrease in the violence variety scale. Rocque and colleagues (2016) used data from a longer-term study that sampled adolescents from a birth cohort in New Jersey (N=447) and then followed them from age 12 to age 31, using five waves of surveys (three during adolescence; two during adulthood). Based on within-person analyses, the authors found that a one-unit increase in their prosocial identity scale (range=1-5) was associated with a significantly lower likelihood of engagement in crime (coefficient= -0.67).

A second group of studies used well-validated scales of moral identity to operationalize prosocial identity (Hardy et al., 2015; Kavussanu et al., 2015; Saulnier & Krettenauer, 2023). For example, Hardy et al. (2015) recruited a U.S. national sample of adolescents (N=384, ages 15-18) and their parents for an online study that examined the association between identity predictors (based on youth assessments) and behavioral outcomes (based on parent assessments). Youth completed the Moral Ideal Self (Hardy et al., 2015) scale, which assesses the extent to which various moral traits (i.e., generous, respectful, truthful) describe the type of person they want to be; and a Moral Internalization Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002), which captures how central a set of moral traits are, to their identity (e.g., "Being someone with these characteristics is an important part of who I am."). Parents rated their children on items drawn from a validated

measure to assess delinquency. The authors found that both measures of moral identity significantly buffered against delinquency (*r*= -0.31, -0.33). Similar results were obtained with an independent sample of 510 youth, where youths' Moral Ideal Self ratings were moderately associated with parent ratings of aggression (Hardy et al., 2015).

Although the studies above focus on non-referred samples of youth, a third group of studies provide preliminary evidence that their results generalize to justice-involved youth. First, based on a sample of 846 state-incarcerated youth (*M* age =17), Skeem et al (2023) used several items drawn from a risk assessment instrument to assess youths' prosocial identity and test its utility in protecting against serious or violent institutional infractions over a one-year period. The authors found that a one-point increase in the prosocial identity scale (range: -1 to 3) translated to 47% and 48% reduction in the rate of violent and serious infraction respectively. Moreover, prosocial identity significantly protected against institutional infractions even after controlling for youth's scores on a comprehensive risk assessment instrument. Second, based on a large sample of justice-involved youth in Florida (N=222,640), Baglivio and colleagues (2014) found that prosocial attitudes (e.g., empathy for victims, respect for authority, favorable attitude toward law-abiding behavior, a sense of responsibility)—which is a concept closely related to prosocial identity—protected against subsequent reoffending over a five-year follow-up period.

In summary, despite variability in definitions and measurement of the construct, emerging evidence from several between-groups *and* within-participant (or repeated measures) studies indicates that prosocial identity relates inversely to antisocial behavior. Although most research has been conducted with non-referred youth, some studies suggest that prosocial identity may also protect against reoffending among youth who have been involved in violence and/or the justice system too.

Identity-Based Theories of Desistance from Criminal Behavior

In keeping with the empirical results summarized above, some criminological theories emphasize the role of prosocial identity in promoting desistance from crime. Although dominant theories of desistance heavily emphasize the role of external forces like social control (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1997), some alternative theories focus on shifts in identity as the primary—if not sufficient—cause of desistance (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013; Giordano 2022; Giordano et al., 2002; LeBel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001). According to these theories, exposure to prosocial environmental opportunities is critical—but there must be an intentional and *subjective* change in how one views oneself and crime, before one will actively seek and utilize those opportunities to transition to a noncriminal life.

Although it is not a theory of desistance *per se*, Oyserman and Markus (1990) offered a pioneering conceptualization of delinquency that features "possible selves" as a motivational source of young people's behavior. Possible selves are the future-oriented components of one's identity that include what one *expects* to become, and what one *fears* they might become. Based on a study of 238 youth who were sampled from juvenile justice and school settings, the authors found empirical support for a key hypothesis. According to that hypothesis, a given possible self protects a young person most strongly against delinquent behavior when it is *balanced* or offset by a countervailing possible self in the same domain (e.g., fearing becoming "a thief," but expecting to get along in school and get a job). When there is little balance between expected and feared selves, this decreases the motivational influence of the feared self on behavior. For example, if a young person cannot envision themselves behaving differently in the future, they are unlikely to make choices that "prevent their feared selves from being realized" (p. 123).

Building on this conceptualization, Paternoster and Bushway (2008, 2013) offered an identity-based theory of desistance from crime that largely focuses on justice-involved adults. According to this theory, justice-involved adults have both *current* models of themselves as "criminal offenders, with a set of preferences and social networks consistent with that self" (p. 1103)—and *future* models of themselves that distill what they hope to become (the positive possible self) and what they worry about becoming (the feared possible self). A person's commitment to their current criminal self will weaken, when they begin to perceive that the costs of commitment to that self outweighs its benefits. As their life's failures become salient and linked to identity, they believe they may in fact become the feared self—which provides motivation to change their preferences and social networks in the conventional direction. This, in turn, promotes desistance from criminal behavior.

This theory enjoys some empirical support. For example, Paternoster and colleagues (2016) used interview data from a sample that was predominantly comprised of African American men who had been convicted of serious drug-related crimes (N=1,044, M age=29) and followed them for 20 years after release from prison. Nine months prior to, and six months after release, participants were asked whether they considered themselves "an addict". Based on their responses, participants were classified as viewing themselves as never an addict (endorsed neither time), a persistent addict (endorsed both times), a new addict (endorsed only post-release), or a reformed addict (endorsed only pre-release). Compared to "persistent addicts", those classified as "reformed addicts" had a significant longer time until re-arrest (HR=1.39, $p<0.001$). Similarly, those who sought any help for their drug problem had significantly longer survival times to re-arrest (HR=1.22, $p<0.01$) than those who did not. These findings suggest that participants whose identity changed (i.e., the "reformed addicts") and who took intentional

actions in response to a favorable view of self (i.e., seeking help for substance use) were more likely to desist (Paternoster et al., 2016).

Paternoster and Bushway's identity-based theory is consistent with other perspectives that focus on the role of human agency in the desistance process. For example, Maruna (2001) intensively studied 65 people with chronic histories of offending. He found that those who continued their criminal careers often used a "condemnation narrative" to interpret their past and current criminal behavior, which tended to cast offending as their only choice. In contrast, those desisted from crime used a "redemption narrative" that cast their true self as a decent person and their past behavior as a special calling to make good in the future. This redemption narrative is a reflection that these people (who desisted from crime) emphasized the prosocial aspects of their identity and perceived themselves as being willing and able to "make good" in the future. In other words, the redemption narrative helped these people build a conventional or prosocial identity.

As suggested by this brief review, several theories articulate how identity can play a central role in promoting desistance from delinquent or criminal behavior. Nevertheless, these theories provide relatively little guidance on (a) whether identity-relevant processes can be deliberately changed and, if so, (b) how interventions could be mounted to achieve desirable justice outcomes.

Answers to these *whether* and *how* questions can be found in the psychological literature. There, rich theoretical narratives on identity-based motivation have been provided—including an identity hierarchy theory (Stryker, 1987), identity-based motivation model (Oyserman, 2007) and identity-value model (Berkman et al., 2017a, 2017b). These theories have been successfully applied to change youth's academic and health behaviors (Clark et al., 2005; Oyserman et al.,

2002; Oyserman et al., 2006). Next, we turn to scholarly insights on how identity is a particularly promising intervention target for adolescents. Later in the paper, we will offer a conceptual model that bridges this scholarship back to our focus on antisocial behavior.

Scholarship Indicating that Identity Is a Promising Intervention Target for Youth

Although there are compelling identity-based theories of criminal desistance *and* evidence that prosocial identity protects youth against antisocial behavior, the promise of identity-based interventions for justice-involved youth has been underexplored. Largely outside the field of criminology, a body of literature suggests that identity is both a developmentally appropriate and psychologically wise target for intervening during adolescence.

First, prosocial identity is a *developmentally appropriate* intervention target for youth—in that it is both malleable and central to the needs and features of adolescence. Classic theories propose that adolescence is a key period of identity exploration and development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia,1980)—and developmental science generally supports such propositions (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Dahl et al., 2018; Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Pfeifer et al., 2007; Pfeifer et al., 2009). For example, Pfeifer and colleagues (2007, 2009) used functional neuroimaging to study developmental differences in how the brain responds to self-evaluative tasks, like judging whether specific traits and attributes appropriately describe oneself. The authors found that—compared to adults—children and adolescents responded more strongly to these tasks in brain structures associated with self-evaluative processes (the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and adjacent rostral/perigenual anterior cingulate cortex). Activities in these brain structures tend to increase from late childhood through middle adolescence and then either plateau or continue to increase (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018, p.2), which suggests that adolescence is a period of elevated self- and identity-related processing. More generally, reviews of developmental neuroscience

indicate that adolescents are particularly sensitive to social and affective influences and broader changes in context—making adolescence a period of enhanced growth, learning, and adaptation during which "young lives can pivot rapidly in both negative and positive directions" (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Dahl et al., 2018, p.441). This suggests that adolescence—particularly early-to-mid adolescence (see Odgers et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2019)—offers a window of opportunity for intervening to promote prosocial development.

Second, prosocial identity is a *psychologically wise* intervention target for youth—in that it is a precise psychological target that is directly relevant to changing antisocial behavior (see above, "Evidence that Prosocial Identity Protects Youth Against Antisocial Behavior"). Based on a comprehensive review of relevant research, Walton and Wilson (2018) define wise interventions as approaches that target specific constructs to alter people's subjective meaning-making about themselves, others, and social situations—and change their behavior. Although these interventions tend to be brief or "light touch," they often achieve sustainable effects that are comparable to those of more prominent and complicated interventions (Walton & Wilson, 2018; Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Theoretically, the sustainable effects of wise interventions are generated from recursive cycles in which an initial change in subjective negative meanings (e.g., beliefs, interpretations, identities) alters a person's behavior in a manner that improves situations; and the improved situations, in turn, reinforce the change in subjective meanings that result in more adaptive behavior (Walton & Wilson, 2018).

In keeping with this conceptualization of wise interventions, theories of identity-based motivation posit that shifts in identity have long-term impact on behavior. First, according to Oyserman et al.'s (2012) model, the effect of an identity on behavior becomes stable and automatized when an individual repeatedly experiences psychologically similar situations that

cue the same working identities and they take the same actions. This explains why, in certain situations, people feel reflexively that their behavior is "right" (identity-consistent) or "wrong" (identity-inconsistent; Oyserman et al., 2012). Second, Pfeifer and Berkman (2018) propose an identity-value model that features a mutual-reinforcing relationship in which salient identities predict relevant behaviors, and identities that correspond to consistently chosen behaviors are also more valued by individuals over time. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that if a prosocial identity is successfully established and made dominant through intervention, it could protect youth against antisocial behavior in the long run—i.e., it could lead to desistance.

As suggested earlier, outside the domain of antisocial behavior, identity-based theories have been successfully applied to improve youth's academic and health outcomes. First, based on two samples of middle school students who were largely from minority groups (total N=472), Oyserman and colleagues (2002, 2006) developed and tested the School-to-Jobs program. This program consists of 9-14 group sessions that are designed to promote school-focused identity to improve students' academic performance. Students were randomly assigned to participate in the intervention group or a regular class, during their elective period. Intervention strategies are numerous and include: having students highlight their academic skills and abilities (to increase the salience of their school-focused identity); envision their desired possible selves (or adult identities); draw positive and negative forces (people and things) for attaining those desired selves; connect their school-focused identity to their desired possible self through a timeline that includes nearer-term (one year) hoped-for and feared possible selves; identify strategies for attaining their school-focused identity and desired possible selves; and normalize and address difficulties they will encounter along the way, while working to attain their school-focused identity (Oyserman et al., 2006). Results from the randomized controlled trial indicate that, over

a one-year follow-up period, the program improved grades, increased school-relevant efforts, and —most relevant to the present review—reduced disruptive behavior at school (e.g., annoying peers, being verbally or physically abusive to the teacher), with standard effect sizes ranging from 0.15 to 0.36.

A second successful translation of identity-based theory to intervention focuses on youths' health outcomes. Based on a sample of Black middle-school youth (N=245), Clark et al (2005) developed and tested the Adult Identity Mentoring (AIM) intervention, which was designed to help youth from low-income families avoid premature sexual behavior. Across ten sessions that spanned a six-week period, the intervention focused on teaching youth skills to achieve positive future identities and involved no direct content on sexual behavior. Intervention strategies included elements like the School-to-Jobs program (e.g., envisioning desired possible selves and committing to one; drawing positive and negative forces for achieving the desired self; identifying skills, strengths, and strategies for actualizing one's future self, connecting the future self to current behavior through a timeline). However, unlike Schools-to-Jobs, AIM explicitly anchors the future possible self to an occupation (Clark et al., 2005). Compared to the control group who were offered standard health education classes, youth in the intervention group showed greater decreases in both their intention to have sex (16% versus 49%) and their self-reported sexual intercourse (decreased 10% versus -1%) over a 19-week period. Among male participants, the intervention's effect on abstinence from intercourse lasted over a one-year follow-up period.

The School-to-Jobs and AIM programs target academic- and health- behavior rather than antisocial behavior. Nevertheless, controlled trials indicate that both identity-based interventions improve young people's outcomes.

In summary, identity is a developmentally appropriate and psychologically wise target for intervention during adolescence—and successful identity-based interventions for youth have been developed outside the domain of antisocial behavior. The key question *is how* to deliberately intervene on relevant processes to foster youth's prosocial identity and promote desistance. We take this question up in our next section, which proposes an identity-based intervention framework for desistance from antisocial behavior.

An Adapted Intervention Framework for Youth that Targets Prosocial Identity

Oyserman's identity-based motivation model (2007) and Berkman's identity value model (2017a, 2017b) propose different mechanisms through which identity influences behavior and identity-relevant behavior becomes stable over time. Nevertheless, two important points of agreement can be drawn from these models, along with relevant research and interventions (e.g., Bryan et al., 2011; Bryan et al., 2013; Oyserman et al., 2007). First, it is possible to change behavior by intentionally leveraging identity in the domain most relevant to that behavior. Second, changing identity can promote lasting change in behavior.

This convergence provides the foundation for an integrated conceptual framework that is specific to prosocial identity and youth's antisocial behavior. In this section, we present that framework after first providing an overview that follows Figure 1. In that figure, the outer ellipse represents the social and cultural factors that encompass and shape identity construction and human behavior. The main part of the framework, which is in the middle of the ellipse from the left to right, illustrates the process by which a possible prosocial identity is initially motivated, gradually reinforced, and then works to promote prosocial behavior in situations where youth must make relevant choices.

Our central hypothesis is that with individual effort and environmental support (shown at the bottom of the figure), a youth's identity can be shifted in the prosocial direction and doing so will promote desistance. The model specifies three intervention targets for establishing a coherent prosocial identity: *content* of the future possible self (promoting hope for a future prosocial self, balanced by fear of a future antisocial self), prosocial identity *prominence* (promoting its importance to the self), and prosocial identity *validation* (instilling confidence that the self can be achieved). In the remainder of this section, we describe the identity change process and then unpack each of the three targets along with relevant intervention strategies.

Process of Initiating, Establishing and Reinforcing a Prosocial Identity

As shown in Figure 1, the initial motivation for leaning toward a possible prosocial identity is often provided by a *feared identity* or an antisocial self that the youth fears becoming (e.g., "I will drop out of school and wind up in prison"). A hoped-for self (e.g., "I will graduate from high school and find a good job") will be a stronger incentive for desistance from delinquency when it is accompanied by a feared self (Oyserman and Markus, 1990). According to Bushway & Paternoster (2013), "at least initially, movement out of a deviant or a spoiled identity is more likely to be based on a motivation to avoid a feared self than on a desire to achieve a positive self" (p. 222), and a "balance" between negative and positive possible selves motivates and guides change.

Although a feared identity may tilt the balance toward a possible prosocial identity (through avoidance motivation), the prosocial identity will need to be reinforced over time to become established and achieve stable effects on behavior (through approach motivation). When a prosocial identity becomes dominant or overtakes a previously antisocial identity, identity-congruent behavior becomes more intuitive or natural—i.e., more driven by the mindset

associated with prosocial identity (see Oyserman & Destin, 2010) and less dependent on deliberate evaluation that involves weighing the subjective values of different choice attributes such as rewards, costs and self-relevance (see Berkman et al., 2017a).

We propose that three elements of prosocial identity—content, prominence, and validation—work together to establish and reinforce prosocial identity as a stable motivator for prosocial behavior (see Figure 1). As a youth becomes motivated to avoid a feared self and achieve a prosocial self, the prosocial identity may come to mind in a situation where they need to make a relevant choice (e.g., "my friends offer me drugs after school"). The content of prosocial identity—what prosocial generally means to *me* and what *my* possible prosocial selves are—is shaped by the youth's social environment, life experiences, and individual reflections on the self (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005; Clinkinbeard & Murray, 2011; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). But the specific meaning of prosocial identity at a given moment is also shaped by the situation (Oyserman, 2007; e.g., "a 'good' person does not break school rules or laws";). If a prosocial identity is prominent and validated, namely, if it feels more important than an antisocial identity (e.g., "I value being a good person more than being a drug user") and also feels achievable (e.g., "I can do it—I know how to turn down the offer without offending my friends"), the youth is likely to act in accordance with the prosocial identity and associated mindset (e.g., "I turn down the offer"). In the next section, we describe how identity-based interventions can facilitate the establishment and reinforcement of prosocial identity by working on its content, prominence, and validation.

Three Elements of Prosocial Identity that Can Be Leveraged by Interventions

Prosocial Identity Content

Identity content refers to the topics or issues that people consider, when they think about who they are (McLean et al., 2019). Identity content is often studied by domain (e.g., school, work, family, politics; McLean et al., 2019). For a domain-specific identity (e.g., gender identity), identity content refers to the meaning people attribute to that identity (e.g., what it means to be a girl/boy; Burke, 2020; Burke & Tully, 1977). Although identities can be focused on the past (what used to be true of one), the present (what is true of one now), or the future (the person one wishes or fears to become) (Oyserman et al., 2012), the relevant target for intervention is the future-focused identity because possible identities motivate behavior change (Oyserman et al., 2006).

Given these principles, we define prosocial identity as a youth's conceptualization of the type of prosocial person they hope to become. That conceptualization can vary widely, ranging from a possible self who achieves basic educational and vocational goals and takes on conventional adult roles and responsibilities—to a possible self who works hard to benefit others or is caring, contributing, helpful, and kind (see below, "Build Consensus on the Definition and Measurement of Prosocial Identity"). Even when young people are not prompted to think about prosocial identity specifically, they often identify relevant possible selves. For example, based on a large sample of detained youth (N=543), Clinkinbeard and Murray (2011) found that youths' most common desired selves were relevant to school- (e.g., "getting my GED"), lifestyle- (e.g., a change of living situation), and vocational goals (e.g., "working full time").

Interventions can help youth identify the type(s) of prosocial person they hope to become in at least three ways. First, programs can promote internal reflection by asking youth to think about their goals, aspirations, and expectations of themselves, and to list and discuss their hoped-for (and feared) possible selves. Even early adolescents are capable of articulating positive and

negative future selves and making connections between those selves and their current behavior (Clark et al., 2005; Oyserman et al., 2002). Second, interventions can prompt youth to consider how "external" factors like social and cultural norms (e.g., conventionally acceptable goals), life experiences (e.g., prosocial engagements), and interactions with others (e.g., positive role models) help define the kind of prosocial person they hope to become (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005; Clinkinbeard & Murray, 2011; Oyserman, 1993; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Third, and in a related sense, interventions can leverage mentoring relationships to help youth construct prosocial possible selves. For example, based on repeated interviews of ten male justice-involved youth over a six month period, Abrams & Aguilar (2005) found that young people tended to anchor their hoped-for selves in positive role models of friends and family members.

As this brief review suggests, strategies for promoting prosocial hoped-for selves are relatively straightforward. The real challenge for promoting desistance, however, is to ensure that those selves are *balanced* by antisocial feared selves. As noted earlier, hoped-for selves motivate behavior change most strongly when they are balanced by a matching feared self (see above). Even for young people who are motivated to change, hoped-for selves alone are insufficient to keep them on track, particularly when they encounter setbacks along the way (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Available evidence on justice-involved youth indicates that the problem is less a lack of prosocial hoped-for selves, than a lack of balance with antisocial feared selves. For example, Wainright et al. (2018) found that youth with high levels of criminogenic risk (e.g., attention- and school discipline problems, familial criminality, high-crime neighborhoods) reported as many positive selves (e.g., "be the best in the class") as those who were lower risk. Similarly,

Oyserman & Markus (1990) found few differences among delinquent and nondelinquent samples in their hoped-for selves. Unlike those in the nondelinquent sample (81%), however, those in the delinquent samples were far less likely to have any matches between their expected and feared selves (37%). Even for the substantial minority of youth in the delinquent sample who feared becoming criminal (33-37%), “these feared selves were not balanced by expectations that focused on avoiding crime and attaining conventional achievement” like getting along in school or getting a job (p. 122). That is, even when antisocial feared selves were present, they were often “missing the expected possible selves that could provide the organizing and energizing vision of how they might avoid criminal activity, and what they might expect if they do” (p. 123). The dominant tendency for youth in the delinquent samples, however, was to have hoped-for selves that were not balanced by feared antisocial selves.

It is important to address three factors that may limit some justice-involved youths’ development of balanced possible selves. First, young people at risk for repeated involvement in antisocial behavior often manifest features like an inflated sense of self, overconfidence, and a lack of future orientation that can make it difficult to instill realistic aspirations (Monahan et al., 2009; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). For these youth, an identity-based approach could usefully be combined with cognitive behavioral treatment that targets antisocial features (for a review, see Skeem & Polaschek, 2020). Second, because of developmental immaturity—particularly impulsivity, difficulty appreciating risks and consequences, and failure to consider long term consequences (Scott et al., 2016; Steinberg, 2009)—very young adolescents may have difficulty projecting themselves into the future in the abstract manner required, to entertain balanced possible selves. Although identity is salient and could be a powerful source of motivation even during very early adolescence (see “Scholarship Indicating that Identity Is a Promising

Intervention Target for Youth" above), it is important to assess maturity and consider how much developmental scaffolding a young person will need, to develop possible selves. Third, some youth's identities may be shaped by subcultural values that do not neatly classify conventional notions of prosocial and antisocial as positive and negative (respectively). In communities with a high prevalence of violence, for example, fighting and other forms of aggression may be regarded as an unavoidable or appropriate way to protect against bullying or build reputation (Farrell et al. 2012, Kliewer et al. 2006, see Jakubovic & Drabick, 2020). Young people who grow up with these messages—which can come from trusted adults like caregivers (Kliewer et al. 2006)—can develop values that do not align with conventional views. They will find it hard to "move from a compelling or appealing current self (a delinquent) to one that is not intuitively as compelling (a good student and part-time, low-wage worker)" (Paternoster & Bushway, 2008, p. 1119). To avoid offering such incongruent propositions, identity-based approaches can work to reframe prosocial roles as desirable for "people like me" (see below, "Challenge Stereotypes about Delinquency to Promote Validation"). For example, Oyserman, Terry and Bybee (2002) deliver interventions in peer groups to activate social processes that mutually validate emerging possible identities. Helping young people articulate their possible selves in a positive peer-based social context can implicitly challenge stereotypes about delinquency and frame prosocial behavior "as part of African American racial identity" (p. 114).

Having addressed specific factors that can contribute to a lack of balanced possible selves, we now return to the two general intervention tasks: (1) making strategic use of feared criminal identities to motivate initial internal change (see Bushway & Paternoster, 2013), and (2) ensuring that those identities are balanced by hoped-for prosocial identities. Strategies for encouraging hoped-for prosocial identities were reviewed earlier. Strategies for strategically

using feared selves are more difficult to find in the literature. However, there is evidence that justice-involved youths' feared selves typically reflect what they might become if they continue on a criminal path (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005)—and often include the consequences of risky behavior (e.g., incarceration, becoming a drug user, hurting family members; see Clinkinbeard & Murray, 2011). Thus, one simple strategy for promoting balance in possible selves is to pair reminders of youths' desired prosocial possible selves (the "carrot") with acknowledgement of the consequences, if they do not take action to avoid their feared criminal selves (the "stick"; see Lee & Oyserman, 2012).

Broader strategies can be drawn from identity-based interventions in other domains (Oyserman et al., 2002; Oyserman et al., 2006; Clark et al., 2005). These strategies involve asking young people to imagine and describe their hoped-for and feared future identities and draw out connections between those identities and their current behavior.

A final strategy may be drawn from restorative justice (RJ) programs, which are increasingly popular and show promise in preventing juvenile reoffending (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2017). A key component of RJ is conferencing, or bringing offenders together with victims, family members, and/or other affected individuals to discuss how to repair the harm caused by the crime. According to Braithwaite's (2020) theory, conferencing confronts a young person with the consequences of their actions in a manner that avoids condemning them as an inherently bad person. The focus is on how to repair the harm of a "bad deed done by an essentially good person" (p. 292). Effective conferencing allows a young person to experience shame in a healthy manner that leads to remorse, efforts to repair the harm, and motivation to become an "even better" person in the future. Conferencing provides a natural platform for

balancing young people's hoped-for "better" possible self against a feared antisocial possible self (which would materialize only through repeated criminal actions).

Prosocial Identity Prominence

Individuals have multiple identities, some of which feel more important than others (McCall & Simmons 1978; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Identity prominence is one's subjective sense of the importance or rank of an identity, in one's own identity hierarchy (Brenner et al., 2014; McCall & Simmons 1978; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Prominence is related to "salience," or the likelihood that a given identity will be activated across social situations (Brenner et al., 2014; Burke, 2020; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Prominence and salience are sometimes used as interchangeable terms—and measures of both constructs predict one's behavioral commitment to an identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Given recent findings that suggest a causal ordering from prominence to salience (Brenner et al., 2014), we use "prominence" here.

We conceptualize prominence as the extent to which a prosocial identity feels important to *me*. We hypothesize that the effect of prosocial identity on behavior is moderated by its prominence, in situations that involve relevant choices (e.g., moral decision-making). This hypothesis is consistent with theories and research indicating that an identity's prominence modifies its impact on behavior (Burke, 2020; Cohn et al., 2015; Maitner et al., 2010; Marin et al., 2009; Oyserman et al., 2007; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Specifically, as the prominence of a given identity increases, individuals are more likely to invest time acting on the identity-relevant role (e.g., Stryker & Serpe, 1994) and to endorse and apply identity-consistent attitudes and behavior (e.g., Oyserman et al., 2007). For example, in an experiment conducted with 182 adult male inmates, Cohn and colleagues (2015) used survey questions to manipulate the prominence

of criminal identity by reminding the experimental group about their criminal behavior (e.g., "What were you convicted of?") while asking the control group questions that were unrelated to crime (e.g., "How many hours per week do you watch television?"). Participants then performed a task that provided the men with an opportunity to cheat (i.e., misreport information), to earn money. Compared to the control group, the frequency of cheating was 60% higher in the group whose criminal identity had been made more prominent (Cohn et al., 2015).

How to make an identity prominent? According to prior scholarship, identity prominence is driven more by an identity's internal features (e.g., values and goals) than external features (e.g., physical characteristics and group memberships; Hardy & Carlo, 2005, p.236). In keeping with this premise, an identity can be made prominent by activating youth's supportive pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, or by exposing youth to cues that encourage supportive attitudes and beliefs (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). For example, Destin & Oyserman (2010) found that low-income students who believed that their hoped-for selves depended on their academic performance worked harder in school than those who saw their hoped-for selves as independent of academic performance. Based on a subsequent experiment conducted with low-income students, Destin & Oyserman (2010) found that—compared to students who were shown the high earnings of top actors, athletes, and musicians—students who were shown the connection between educational achievement and average job earnings worked harder on schoolwork. In short, students' academic identity was prominent and impacted their school-related behavior when (a) they already believed their futures depended on their current behavior, or (b) they were exposed to information that encouraged those beliefs.

To make a prosocial identity prominent, then, interventions can expose youth to cues and information that encourage relevant beliefs, attitudes, and values. For example, youth can be

connected with prosocial role models they admire (e.g., older peers at school; successful family members) who embody their conceptualization of success and can highlight, through discussion of challenging lived experiences, how their earlier hard work and prosocial choices paid off. Another, simpler approach involves directly labeling or indirectly framing a youth as being a "trustworthy", "honest", "helpful", or "caring" person, in an effort to increase self-regulation toward prosocial behavior. This approach has been used with success in other behavioral domains. According to the identity-value model, for example, if the goal is to quit smoking, interventions that frame one as a quitter or a person who can smoke less will decrease smoking (Berkman et al., 2017a). Indeed, experiments indicate that a given behavior (e.g., voting) is better motivated by framing the behavior as a desired identity (e.g., "to be a voter") than by prompting an action (e.g., "to vote"; Bryan et al., 2011). Similarly, a given antisocial behavior (e.g., cheating on a test) is better prevented by describing the behavior as a negative identity (e.g., "being a cheater") than by discouraging the action (e.g., "cheating"; Bryan et al., 2013).

Prosocial Identity Validation

Validation of prosocial identity refers to the extent to which youth believe they can achieve a hoped-for prosocial identity—i.e., the extent to which the hoped-for identity feels attainable and the matching feared self feels avoidable (see Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Given past theory and research (e.g., Abrams & Aguilar, 2005; Cuevas et al., 2017; Goodson & Morash, 2017; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993), we hypothesize that prosocial identity must be validated to have a meaningful and sustainable effect on behavior. There is indirect empirical support for this hypothesis. Based on a sample of 12,955 justice-involved youth, Cuevas and colleagues (2017) measured young people's sense of prosocial self-efficacy—i.e., their belief in their ability to live a prosocial life and to control antisocial behavior.

The authors found that prosocial self-efficacy predicted youths' earlier release from residential placement and protected them against subsequent delinquent behavior.

We believe the validation process requires not only individual effort (i.e., *internal* validation, including self-perceptions of one's ability to achieve a prosocial identity) but also environmental support (i.e., *external* validation, including opportunities for achieving a prosocial identity and supportive messages from parents, teachers, and significant others). Our inclusion of external validation is consistent with a basic premise of wise interventions—i.e., altering someone's subjective meanings "will improve outcomes only when other aspects of the system necessary for improvement are in place" (Walton & Wilson, 2018, p. 620).

How might interventions promote validation of youths' prosocial identity? Synthesizing relevant theories (e.g., Berkman et al., 2017a, 2017b; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993; Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Walton & Wilson, 2018) and interventions (e.g., Clark et al., 2005; Oyserman et al., 2002, Oyserman et al., 2006), we identified three specific validation tasks and relevant groups of intervention strategies. Each is outlined below.

First, Challenge Stereotypes about Delinquency to Promote Validation (see Oyserman et al., 2006). As suggested earlier, biased associations between a young person's social identities and criminal behavior must be explicitly addressed, to prevent feelings that a prosocial identity is "not for people like me." Racial, gender, and social class stereotypes are common and influence the beliefs and behavior of both in-group and out-of-group members (Spencer et al., 2016; Steele, 2010). For example, low-income and racially minority students are often stereotyped as less capable of performing well in academics than non-minorities—and

those stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies (Steele, 2010). By the same token, Black men are implicitly associated with violent behavior (Goff et al., 2008; Spencer et al., 2016) and teachers are more likely to label Black boys as "troublemakers" and write them up for disciplinary infractions—even when their behavior is indistinguishable from that of White students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). These stereotypes can interfere with a young person's capacity to form a believable prosocial self. Research shows that students who are aware that they are racially stigmatized tend to mistrust teachers and feel that "people like me" do not belong or cannot succeed in school (Murphy & Taylor, 2012; Steele, 2010).

How can identity-based interventions successfully challenge these stereotypes and deliver the message that prosocial identity is desirable and possible, regardless of racial, gender, and social class identity—and even a history of justice involvement? Interventions can work to promote *internal validation* by leveraging techniques that have been used in other domains to prevent biased self-reference. For example, Walton and Cohen (2011) designed a "social-belonging intervention" to help students who often struggle in college because of stereotypes associated with their racial minority identity. In a single one-hour session, participants are presented with information that normalizes students' doubts about belonging in college, then asked to reflect on that information and write an essay that uses examples from their own experience to explain the message. In a controlled trial, the authors found that this intervention improved Black students' outcomes, including their time spent studying and GPAs (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Similar techniques could be adapted to help justice-involved youth perceive that a prosocial identity is relevant and achievable. For example, to address stereotypes that associate race and poverty with crime, a wise intervention could present information that indicates perceptions of crime rates in Black neighborhoods are exaggerated (Lincoln & Pager, 2001) and

encourage participants to use personal examples to concretize that information. Alternatively, prosocial identity could be internally validated by exposing young people to prosocial role models who share a stigmatized racial identity but refute the criminal stereotype (Marx & Goff, 2005; Marx & Roman, 2002), and having them reflect on their interactions.

Beyond fostering internal validation, it is crucial for interventions to promote *external validation* of prosocial identity through fair and supportive caregiving and mentoring practices. Given that justice-involved youth tend "to seek outside sources to validate who they might become in the future" (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005, p.187), important people in their lives can strongly support desistance by conveying that youths' hoped-for prosocial selves are attainable through conventionally sanctioned approaches (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Some existing interventions could be adapted to help caregivers and other supportive people validate a young person's budding prosocial identity. For example, Functional Family Therapy (FFT; Sexton & Alexander, 2000; Sexton & Turner, 2010) is an evidence-based program for delinquency that focuses on building a young person's alliance with family members. FFT recognizes that low self-efficacy often characterizes high-risk youth and families, so therapists explicitly work to instill hope and help caregivers create a positive motivational context as the first step of intervention (Sexton & Alexander, 2000). Beyond family members, teachers can also validate youths' possible prosocial identities. In a field experiment conducted with 1,682 students, Okonofua et al. (2016) demonstrated that having teachers complete a brief "empathic discipline" intervention that involved considering potential explanations for youth's misbehavior decreased students' rates of suspension from school (4.8% vs. 9.6% suspended in the treatment vs. control groups, respectively). Changing teachers' mindsets about young people with challenging behavior may have encouraged more validating teacher-student interactions.

Justice professionals and peers can also validate youths' possible prosocial identities. In a qualitative study of 30 detained youth, Au & Wong (2022) found that many youths met new friends or role models (including coaches and mentors) who enhanced their self-reflection and empowered them to "start a new life after release, seek a decent job, and not reoffend" (p.8). And, as noted earlier, Oyserman, Terry and Bybee (2002) deliver identity-based interventions in peer groups, to activate social processes that powerfully validate adolescents' emerging prosocial selves. When young people discuss their possible selves in a positive peer-based context, they not only challenge stereotypes of delinquency, but also implicitly reframe prosocial roles as something that "people like me" both hope for, and can attain.

Second, Help Youth Generate Specific Strategies to Attain Prosocial Selves and Promote Validation (Oyserman et al., 2006). Helping young people develop current, concrete strategies for attaining their future prosocial self is a pivotal intervention goal for this population. Justice-involved youth manifest fewer strategies for achieving their hoped-for identities and avoiding their feared ones, compared to youth who are not justice-involved (Clinkinbeard & Murray, 2011; Goodson & Morash, 2017; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993; Wainright et al., 2018). In a qualitative study, Abrams and Aguilar (2005) found that justice-involved youth "had trouble devising realistic or attainable strategies, particularly to avoid their feared selves (i.e., returning to old patterns, friends, and criminal surroundings)" (p. 191). Given that a lack of realistic strategies for attaining prosocial identity predicts reoffending (Goodson & Morash, 2017), the authors flagged this identity-relevant need as the core target for behavior change among justice-involved youth (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005).

Based on prior research and relevant interventions, several approaches could be adapted to help justice-involved youth design personalized, credible strategies for attaining their prosocial identity. First, providers can use didactic and experiential techniques to help youth understand what a concrete strategy is—i.e., something that can be understood and replicated by another person (e.g., "apply to local collages") rather than being vague or abstract (e.g., "change my ways; Clinkenbeard & Murray, 2011, p. 1223). Second, as suggested earlier, providers can supply relevant templates and encourage youth to create a timeline that links their prosocial possible self with nearer-term strategies, skills and resources that can help them attain that identity (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). The goals of the timeline include bringing the future psychologically closer to present behavior—and generating external validation and support by having youth refine the timeline through discussion with peers and supportive adults (Oyserman et al., 2006). Third, youth can be scaffolded to make an action plan to implement short-term strategies and goals—specifying *where*, *when*, *how,* and *with whom* to implement a given approach (Bailey, 2017). Finally, as they implement their action plans, youth can be coached to address obstacles, build on strengths, and connect to resources that will help them achieve proximate goals. Ideally, providers will leverage empirically supported protective factors against antisocial behavior, as they help youth shape their action plans for achieving prosocial identities —by elevating conventional goals (academic and employment success), socioemotional skills, and bonds with prosocial peers, family and others (Barton, 2015).

Helping youth generate actionable strategies will validate their possible prosocial selves most powerfully in the context of caring relationships. Based on a sample of 543 detained youth, Clinkenbeard and Murray (2011) found a youth's sense of program belonging (i.e., perceived membership and support) and perceived support from staff (i.e., how staff would respond to

youth's successes and failures on a new activity) positively predicted the number of concrete strategies they generated for achieving their desired future selves. These strategies, in turn, matter for behavior change and positive outcomes. For example, Horowitz et al. (2020) found that students who linked at least one concrete strategy for action (e.g., studying, taking better notes) to a hoped-for school identity were particularly likely to show identity-related improvements in their grades.

Third, Validate Prosocial Identity by Inoculating Youth Against Giving Up When They Encounter Difficulties (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Behaving in a prosocial manner often involves regulating one's own needs, impulses, and negative emotions (Kanacri et al., 2013). More broadly, achieving conventional success at school or in the workplace requires persistent attention and effort. It can be particularly challenging for justice-involved youth to stick to a prosocial path, since they often manifest a preference for immediate rewards, a lack of future orientation, and learning problems (Barrett & Katsiyannis, 2017; Barton, 2015; Monahan et al., 2009). Many of the features that place youth at risk for antisocial behavior also make them more difficult to engage and retain in intervention (Skeem & Polaschek, 2020).

To engage youth and promote persistence, interventions can be adapted to help them interpret challenges as signals that prosocial goals are meaningful and worth pursuing, rather than as an indication that prosocial identity is "not for me" or impossible to achieve (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). For example, multiple sessions of the School-to-Jobs program focus on identifying and interpreting *difficulties* related to desired school identities—including social and academic problems in everyday life. Students work together in small groups to develop strategies for solving problems, with a shared message that difficulties along the way to a desired identity

are normal and resolvable (Oyserman et al., 2002; Oyserman et al., 2006). Interventions targeting prosocial identity can apply similar approaches to promote positive interpretation of difficulties.

Other relevant intervention techniques include active reflection and "saying-is-believing" exercises that help reframe experiences and reinforce new ideas (see Walton & Wilson, 2018). For example, saying-is-believing is a simple but powerful technique that has been used in the social-belonging intervention mentioned earlier (Walton & Cohen, 2011) and in growth-mindset interventions (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Participants are asked to endorse a new message and explain the new information to other people (e.g., through writing or talking, typically to those less experienced than themselves)—using examples from their own experience, which encourages them to think actively and internalize the new message (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Applying this to the interpretation of difficulties along the way of achieving a prosocial identity, providers can a) present evidence or case vignettes indicating that challenges to achieving desired identities often arise, but are resolvable and worth addressing (e.g., "no pain, no gain"), and b) asking youth to reflect on a time when they overcame difficulties to realize positive goals and use their own experience to provide guidance to younger kids about addressing difficulties, through writing a letter or speaking in a video log. Again, as youth work through the process of reframing and addressing difficulties along the way toward attaining a prosocial identity, positive feedback and support from parents, teachers, peers, and other significant people is crucial.

Summary: Three Prosocial Identity Targets and Relevant Intervention Strategies

In summary, interventions can work to promote three elements of prosocial identity: (a) balance in hoped-for prosocial identities and feared antisocial identities, (b) prominence or internalization of prosocial identities, and (c) internal and external validation of prosocial

identities. Table 1 below defines these three targets and outlines relevant intervention strategies for promoting desistance from antisocial behavior and positive youth development.

Roadmap for Advancing an Identity-Based Approach to Positive Youth Development

We believe this identity-based framework can be applied to begin translating PYJ into innovative interventions that add value to juvenile justice. In this section, we provide a roadmap for advancing this approach. Before doing so, it is important to place the framework in context.

In our view, this framework is aligned with key premises of a Positive Youth Justice model (PYJ, Butts et al., 2010)—and makes them more testable and actionable. For example, the youth assets that PYJ targets (learning/doing and attaching/belonging; Butts et al., 2010) are drawn from social control theories that prioritize the role of social learning and social bonds in reducing crime (e.g., Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Sampson & Laub, 1997). These theories have been critiqued for failing to articulate *how* social control facilitates behavior change (Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2008). In contrast, the framework highlighted here articulates how shifts in identity can motivate behavior change—and offers testable hypotheses about how increasing the prominence and validation of prosocial identity can promote desistance.

Identity-based approaches to intervention are by no means the only approach needed for PYJ (specifically) or justice-involved youth (generally). After all, antisocial behavior is a complex product of multiple individual and contextual risk factors (e.g., Barton, 2015; Jaffee & Odgers, 2014). Identity-based approaches focus primarily on individual factors, but do not ignore the critical role that contextual factors play in desistance. In theory, people "must first change their self-identity (who they are and want to be) before prosocial opportunities arrive and can successfully be taken advantage of" (Paternoster et al., 2016, p. 1219). Nevertheless, shifts in identity theoretically are insufficient for desistance—they must be paired with opportunities for

prosocial behavior, before a young person can successfully improve their developmental trajectory (see Bushway & Paternoster, 2013; Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2008). As emphasized in the framework above, providing external validation for a developing prosocial identity is crucial for behavior change. For these reasons, identity-based interventions should be viewed as promising complements to (not replacements for) juvenile justice interventions that focus on family-, peer-, school-, employment-, or neighborhood factors. In fact, light-touch identity-based approaches could act synergistically with skills-based and other interventions to maximize desistance.

It is important to understand that identity-based interventions are built to promote positive outcomes, *despite* youths' disadvantaged backgrounds. As Oyserman and Destin (2010) argue, identity-based interventions lie at the interface between "macro" and "micro" factors:

> From a macro-level perspective, the aspiration-attainment gap is a function of social structural differences that are relatively impossible to change without large-scale, long term and financially intensive intervention directed at changing children's opportunity structures… However, … a number of studies suggest that another approach is possible because *social structural factors influence the aspiration-achievement gap, in part, through their influence on children's perceptions of what is possible for them and people like them in the future*… Accordingly, interventions that focus on this macro-micro interface and emphasize the meaning children make of their possibilities can help children overcome the constraints imposed by social structural variables. (p. 1001, suspension points and italic font added)

In short, the identity-based framework presented here is *one* promising approach for supplementing and advancing reform in juvenile justice services. In the rest of this section, we describe how researchers and practitioners can work together to realize the promise of this framework for developing interventions that promote positive youth development. As explained below, research-practice partnerships can be used to build consensus on the definition and measurement of prosocial identity, further establish the predictive utility of prosocial identity,

and assess the extent to which identity changes in response to existing strengths-based services. Interventions that directly target identity content, prominence, or validation should also be directly tested for their impact on antisocial behavior.

Build Consensus on the Definition and Measurement of Prosocial Identity

Prosocial identity has been defined and measured differently across disciplines. In psychological research, validated measures have often been used to operationalize prosocial identity as moral identity, or the "extent to which people identify with, and are invested in, being a moral person and doing what is moral" or right (Hardy et al., 2014a, p. 45). At the upper end, this is an other-oriented identity that includes an intention to benefit others and such behaviors as caring, sharing, helping, volunteering, and contributing (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Kanacri et al., 2013). But in the criminological literature, ad hoc proxy measures have typically been created to operationalize prosocial identity—as the extent to which people identify with, and are invested in, being an upstanding person and following laws and social norms (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013; Na & Paternoster, 2019; Rocque et al., 2016). Emphasis is placed on conventional behavior that shows a commitment to education, employment, and family goals. For example, Bushway and Paternoster (2013) describe a prototypic possible prosocial self as "working in a job (though perhaps for minimum wage), legitimately buying things for my family, owning a used car, and ceasing my life of drug use and crime" (p. 222).

Again, we conceptualize prosocial as a bipolar dimension that is anchored by antisocial tendencies at one end (deviating from social norms and disregarding the rights of others) and prosocial tendencies at the other (supporting the social order and promoting others' welfare). An important question for identity-based interventions is whether practitioners should seek to establish hoped-for prosocial selves that are merely conventional (as emphasized in the

criminological literature)—or should aim beyond that to establish moral, or explicitly other-oriented, values and tendencies (as emphasized in the psychological literature).

We expect interventions to promote desistance if they merely achieve conventional hoped-for selves and behavior. However, the level of a possible self's prosociality (or change in prosociality) that is necessary to promote desistance is an empirical question.

Researchers and practitioners can take two important steps to advance the field in general and to answer this specific question. First, they can begin using validated measures of prosocial identity, triangulate results across studies, and work toward achieving consensus on how best to define the construct. We suggest that practitioners consider using two well-validated self-report assessments for youth: the Moral Ideal Self (Hardy et al., 2014a) scale, which assesses the extent to which 20 moral traits (i.e., generous, respectful, truthful) describe the type of person the participant wants to be; and the 5-item Moral Internalization Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002), which captures how central a set of moral traits are, to one's personal identity (e.g., "Being someone with these characteristics is an important part of who I am."). These scales have high internal consistency and relate in a theoretically coherent manner to aggression and rule-breaking in adolescent samples (Hardy et al., 2014a). They can be used to assess young people's degree of prosocial identity. To our knowledge, however, these measures have not been used with justice-involved youth. A second-best option is to use and further validate a measure of prosocial identity drawn from a popular risk assessment tool (e.g., the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument, see Skeem et al., 2023). It will be less helpful to measure prosocial identity by continuing to extract a few face valid items from one-off surveys that were designed for another purposes, study by study. Validated measures that can readily be applied in practice must be used

to assess prosocial identity, if the goal is to build a generalizable knowledge base that can inform positive interventions.

Second, researchers can test the extent to which other-oriented prosocial identity (emphasized in psychological research) adds incremental utility to conventional identity (emphasized in criminological research), in protecting justice-involved youth from re-offending. This can be done, for example, by parsing the Moral Ideal Self Scale into measures of other-oriented identity (i.e., the *loving/caring* subscale) and conventional identity (i.e., the rest of the subscales, e.g., *honest/true*, *knows/choose right)*—and testing whether other-oriented identity adds any value to conventional identity, in predicting recidivism. The results of this kind of research can help shape the basic target, for interventions that are designed to promote prosocial identity for justice-involved youth. As noted earlier, we expect that shifting a young person's hoped-for self in the "merely conventional" direction may be sufficient to promote desistance.

Estimate Prosocial Identity's Protective Effect and Explore Who Benefits Most

If practitioners and researchers begin using validated measures of prosocial identity more consistently, they can more rigorously test the value of this construct in protecting justice-involved youth against antisocial behavior. Although research indicates that prosocial identity meaningfully protects young people against antisocial behavior (see above), effect sizes vary across studies and few studies focus on justice-involved youth. It is critical to generate reliable and precise estimates of the association between prosocial identity and future behavioral and justice outcomes in this population, in part because these estimates are relevant to the size of effect that could be achieved with an identity-based intervention.

Beyond estimating the general value of prosocial identity measures in predicting justice-involved youths' outcomes, it is also important to explore whether prosocial identity matters

more for some youth than others. One relevant question is whether a youth's cumulative risk of reoffending moderates the relationship between prosocial identity and behavioral outcomes. This question is part of a larger debate about whether protective factors like prosocial identity have "main effects" that protect everyone, or "interaction effects" that preferentially buffer higher risk people against reoffending or (conversely) selectively protect lower risk people without dense risk factors (Jenson & Fraser, 2016; Lösel & Farrington, 2012). Answering these questions could shed light on which group of youth, in terms of risk level, developmental (im)maturity, or other characteristics, could benefit most from an identity-based intervention.

Examine whether Prosocial Identity Mediates the Effect of Existing Services

In addition to using validated measures of prosocial identity in youth assessments and examining their utility in protecting against reoffending, research-practice partners can also test whether changes in prosocial identity help explain the effect of existing services for justice-involved youth. The main requirements would be to administer measures of prosocial identity as part of a youth's routine assessments during a given course of services, ideally as part of a controlled evaluation of the service's impact on reoffending.

Even if programs do not explicitly target identity, it is possible that some programs—particularly strengths-based programs, restorative justice programs, or cognitive behavioral programs that target antisocial values—shift identity which, in turn, decreases the likelihood of reoffending. For example, LifeSkills Training (see Botvin et al., 2006) is a classroom-based program designed to prevent substance abuse and related risky behavior. Butts et al. (2014) highlight LifeSkills as the "one" evidence-based prevention program for youth that is explicitly skill-based and therefore consistent with the PYJ approach. With modest additional measurement, future implementation trials could examine whether LifeSkills' teaching of self-

management skills, social skills, and drug resistance skills prevent delinquency partly because it shifts young people's identity in the prosocial direction. Moving to the traditional risk-focused paradigm, a similar approach could be used to examine whether cognitive behavioral group therapy for anger-related problems (e.g., Hoogsteder et al., 2015; Sudolksky et al., 2004) protects against reoffending partly because it nudges young people's identity in the prosocial direction (along with their values and attitudes).

Although controlled trials of brand-name programs are conducted infrequently in juvenile justice settings, it is also possible to use rigorous quasi-experimental approaches to examine whether and how a given service works (see Darnell & Schuler, 2015). Assuming that young peoples' services, strengths, and needs are measured consistently (ideally, digitally), motivated practitioners can partner with skilled researchers to develop a plan for rigorously testing whether a given service or program works and, if so, whether it does so partly as a function of change in a young person's identity.

Design & Test Interventions to Promote Prosocial Identity

Although the promising role that identity can play in promoting criminal desistance has been gaining attention, most studies on this topic have been observational and qualitative, "relying on extensive life history interviews which yield great richness of detail but few, if any, testable hypotheses" that provide little "empirical foundation on which to develop policy in correctional environments" (O'Sullivan et al., 2015, p. 219). The primary goal of this paper was to offer a testable framework for targeting prosocial identity in interventions to promote desistance—as one approach for beginning to gain traction on the larger PYJ model.

Thus, the most exciting path of action that researchers and practitioners can follow involves adapting and rigorously testing the identity-based intervention strategies outlined in the

heart of this paper (see “An Adapted Identity-Based Framework for Intervention”)—i.e., strategies designed to develop a balanced prosocial possible self, increase the prominence of that identity, and validate it both internally and externally (see Table 1). As Kurt Lewin (1943) famously said, “If you want truly to understand something, try to change it.”

We presented specific intervention strategies from adjacent identity domains that could be adapted to promote prosocial identity—from simple labeling approaches (e.g., framing a youth as being a trustworthy person, see Berkman et al., 2017a), to mid-range validation approaches (e.g., changing officers’ mindsets about youth, see Okonofua et al., 2016), to more traditional group-based interventions (e.g., Schools-to-Jobs, see Oyserman et al., 2002, Oyserman et al., 2006). It is important to underscore that even the “traditional” strategies from adjacent domains are relatively light touch and scalable—involving fewer than eight group sessions led by paraprofessionals. Experiments are needed to implement and test the impact of these strategies. This is the most direct way to shed light on the extent to which identity-based approaches (a) are feasible to implement in justice settings, and (b) add precision and value to existing services, in preventing recidivism.

Although intervention-based experiments are the most exciting path forward, predictions from the framework could also be tested in observational research to clarify whether and how elements of prosocial identity work together to promote desistance. For example, appropriate measures could be added to a prospective study of recidivism to test whether the prominence and validation of a young person’s prosocial identity moderates its association with future reoffending. According to the framework outlined here, for instance, prosocial identity should have a particularly strong protective effect when it is paired with social validation and support from caregivers or teachers.

Conclusion & Recommendations

For over a decade, practitioners and researchers have been expressing enthusiasm about the reform-oriented philosophy offered by Positive Youth Justice (PYJ) models (Butts et al., 2010; Case & Haines, 2015). If these policy-relevant models could be translated into rules and guidelines that informed decision-making about youth, they would fundamentally alter the way that the justice system responds to young people. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to find direct translations of PYJ into policy or practice, and nearly impossible to find empirically supported interventions that uniquely reflect PYJ. In this paper, we introduced prosocial identity as one promising construct that can be leveraged to begin translating PYJ into innovative interventions and determining whether they add value to traditional services, in improving young people's outcomes.

Prosocial identity is directly relevant to the task of identity development during adolescence, plays a central role in theories of desistance, and demonstrably protects youth against antisocial behavior. Synthesizing psychological and criminological literature, we offered a testable conceptual framework to explain how individual effort and environmental supports could be deployed to shift a young person's identity in the prosocial direction—i.e., by targeting the *content* of relevant possible selves (promoting hope for a prosocial self, balanced by fear of an antisocial self), the *prominence* or importance of prosocial identity to the self, and the *validation* of prosocial identity or confidence that it can be achieved. For each target, we outlined intervention strategies from adjacent domains (school, health) that could be adapted to promote desistance. The roadmap we provided for advancing this approach emphasizes how

research-practice collaboratives can test interventions that target identity content, prominence, or validation.

Although many avenues outlined here have not been directly tested, we expect this approach to add value to PYJ reform efforts (specifically) and existing juvenile justice services (generally). There has been considerable progress in our understanding of “what works” for treating justice-involved youth (Sandler et al., 2014; Snell & Eguzouwa, 2016; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007; Vries et al., 2015)—and yet, evidence-based interventions tend to be complex, costly, and inaccessible to most youth who need them (Hengeller & Schoenwald, 2011). An identity-based approach could help translate the PYJ philosophy into a few well-targeted, well-timed, “light touch” interventions that are feasible to implement and demonstrably promote desistance.

To achieve implementation at the scale needed to improve the lives of young people involved in the justice system, however, these interventions must be paired with larger policy levers. Just as policy isn’t useful until it is translated into specific actions that can be put into practice, a set of effective intervention strategies aren’t useful until policy guides their implementation. Relevant policies can be written to attach effective identity-based interventions to local, state, or federal regulations and resources. For example, these interventions can be hard-wired into a state budget that funds ongoing implementation and evaluation of strengths-based juvenile diversion programs. More broadly, these identity-based interventions—and the larger PYJ principles that support them—can establish a national presence through nonpartisan funders and organizations who support the creation of practice guidelines and training programs that make them accessible. In these ways, policy and practice could be combined to achieve fundamental systemic change that truly promotes positive youth justice.

Figure 1

An Adapted Intervention Framework for Youth That Targets Prosocial Identity

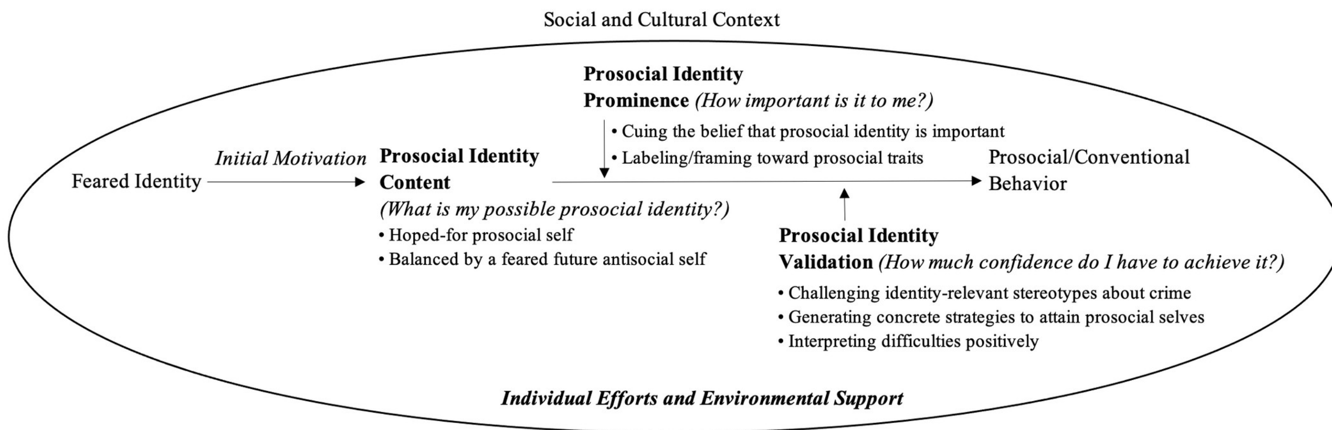

Table 1

Three Elements of Prosocial Identity, Definitions, and Relevant Intervention

	Goal	Intervention Strategies[1] and References
Prosocial Identity Content	Promote a hoped-for prosocial self, balanced by a feared antisocial self	1) Construct hoped-for prosocial selves a. Internal reflection on goals, aspirations, and expectations of the self (School-to-Jobs, Oyserman et al., 2002; Adult Identity Mentoring, Clark et al., 2005) b. Use norms, experiences, and other external factors to define desired prosocial self-images (e.g., Clinkinbeard & Murray, 2011) c. Leverage mentoring relationships and prosocial role models in immediate context (e.g., Abrams & Aguilar, 2005) 2) Elicit balanced feared selves a. Pair reminders of hoped-for prosocial self and consequences if actions were not taken to avoid antisocial self (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005; Clinkinbeard & Murray, 2011; Lee & Oyserman, 2012) b. Use restorative justice conferencing to motivate becoming "even better" self, distinct from criminal actions (Braithwaite, 2020) c. Ask to imagine and describe hoped-for and feared future self-images (School-to-Jobs, Oyserman et al., 2002, Oyserman et al., 2006; Adult Identity Mentoring, Clark et al., 2005)
Prosocial Identity Prominence	Promote the importance of prosocial identity to the self	1) Expose to cues/information that encourage beliefs prosocial identity is important (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). 2) Directly or indirectly label youth as prosocial (Berkman et al., 2017a; Bryan et al., 2011; Bryan et al., 2013)
Prosocial Identity Validation	Promote confidence that the prosocial identity can be achieved	1) Challenge identity-relevant stereotypes about crime a. Present new information/facts that challenge stereotypes (Social-Belonging Intervention, Walton & Cohen, 2011; Marx & Goff, 2005; Marx & Roman, 2002) b. Use personal examples to concretize the new information/facts (Social-Belonging Intervention, Walton & Cohen, 2011) c. Promote unbiased and supportive parent, teacher, mentor, and peer relationships (Functional Family Therapy, Sexton & Alexander, 2000; Empathic Discipline Intervention, Okonofua et al., 2016; Au & Wong, 2022; Braithwaite, 2020; School-to-Jobs, Oyserman et al., 2002) 2) Generate concrete strategies to attain desired prosocial identity a. Understand what it means to be a concrete strategy (Clinkenbeard & Murray, 2011) b. Bring the future to current behavior by creating a timeline (School-to-Jobs, Oyserman et al., 2006) c. Make plans to implement short-term goals and strategies (Bailey, 2017) d. Identify strengths, address obstacles, and connect to resources and opportunities 3) Interpret difficulties positively a. Normalize challenges along the way to behavior change (Saying-is-Believing technique, Dweck & Yeager, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Walton & Wilson, 2018) b. Develop solutions for difficulties, through peer group activities (School-to-Jobs, Oyserman et al., 2002, Oyserman et al., 2006)

[1]Note: When a complete adaptable intervention or technique is available, we list the names of those interventions or techniques and their references; otherwise, we list references from where the suggested intervention strategies are extracted.

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