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Title	The code of the street as a hook to build redemption scripts in Cork City
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Publication date	2026-08-24
Original Citation	Windle, J, Cambridge, G & Lynch, O 2026, 'The code of the street as a hook to build redemption scripts in Cork City', British Journal of Criminology, pp. 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azag077
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1093/bjc/azag077
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The British Journal of Criminology, 2026, **00**, 1–19
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azag077
Original Manuscript

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The code of the street as a hook to build redemption scripts in Cork City

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While Anderson's code of the street is often used to explore why people engage in violent behaviours, its role in problematic substance use and the recovery process has yet to be explored. This study draws from life history interviews with 40 men who recovered from active addiction and desisted from offending. Participants articulated a localized version of the street code (being a 'hard-man'), the key component of which was capacity for violence. Participants also emphasized the role of problematic substance use in the development of hard-man reputations, but reported losing physicality and thus the capacity for violence as substance use progressed into active addiction. This loss of physicality was a 'hook for change' which motivated them to begin the recovery process, and step away from their long sought-after hard-man identity.

Keywords code of the street, hook for change, recovery, desistance, addiction, masculinity

Introduction

Anderson's (1999) code of the street is a theoretical model explaining inner-city violence and other forms of harm. The street code is identified as a subcultural adaption to economic deprivation, social exclusion and lack of trust in mainstream institutions. That is, Anderson (1999) identifies inner-city people as inherently good, but driven to violent and destructive behaviour by structural inequalities. The theory has been extremely influential, subjected to extensive empirical tests (see Fader and León 2024; Moule and Fox 2021), and used to

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explain quantitative and qualitative data collected in the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland and elsewhere (i.e. Brookman *et al.* 2011; Holligan 2015; Hourigan 2011; Ilan 2013; Kubrin 2005).

This study is the first to consider how versions of the street code can facilitate not only our conceptualization of violent offending but also problematic substance use, desistance and recovery. Drawing upon interviews with 40 men in Cork City (Republic of Ireland), this research found that participants used heavy consumption of licit and illicit substances, alongside acts of violence, to build reputations as hard-men within their communities. This behaviour was essential to participants performance of masculinity, however, their substance use eventually drifted into active addiction which reduced their physicality and capacity to carry out violence. The tools for establishing and portraying masculinity, typified by the hard-man persona, were ultimately the same behaviours leading to the loss of this identity. This provided a 'hook for change' (Giordano *et al.* 2002) and eventually facilitated the development of 'redemption scripts' (Maruna 2001) vital to the men's recovery and desistance journeys.

As the street code is a subcultural theory, this study follows the call by Bell and colleagues (2021: 812) for desistance research to 'pay more attention to the role that local external factors, including subcultural norms and values, can play in shaping desistance'. Following this approach, this study explores how fluctuating narratives around the influence of street codes can *support* people's transitions away from crime and problematic substance use. As such, this study contributes to the international literature on street code theory as well as desistance from offending and recovery from addiction as interwoven phenomena.

The street code and masculinity

Anderson (1999: 33) defines the street code as:

> A set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behaviour, particularly violence. The rules prescribe both proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so supply a rationale allowing those inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way.

The street code is 'a performance for an audience' (Fader and León 2024: 20) whereby individuals attempt to increase their own status by pilfering respect from others in 'campaigns for respect' (Anderson 1997: 15). Anderson (1999: 33) defined respect as 'being treated right or being granted deference', and framed it as a scarce, and thus precious, form of social capital that individuals can collect and trade, and others seek to steal. The willingness to use violence is the 'basic requirement' of the code, which also requires exhibitions of self-reliance and courage, and punishment of disrespect. These elements intersect with each other, for example, being disrespectful to others can simultaneously be a display of courage and mechanism for individuals to communicate a lack of fear of retaliation and willingness to use violence. This interaction highlights the values linked to the street code as a profound nihilism demonstrating 'lack of hope for the future' (Anderson 1999: 109).

The street code is transgenerational; passed down through family and by peer-to-peer interaction within the community. In describing the mechanism of transmission, in what might now be called adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Felitti 2019), Anderson (1999) observed children living in households suffering domestic abuse, problematic substance use and poverty, but moved beyond the narrow psychological focus of ACEs to anchor these transgenerational behavioural patterns within multiple structural inequalities associated with systemic poverty and institutional racism.

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The street code has not been without critique. Importantly for the current study, Jimerson and Oware (2006: 27) critiqued street code theory through an ethnography of inner-city basketball training sessions in Chicago. They found that some vocalized the code in 'a post hoc rationalization' of violence and what some participants 'said contradicted what they did in public'. These participants wanted to 'tell the story of the street' while not necessarily acting street. This critique frames the street code as a narrative. A story some inner-city residents tell themselves and others. The importance of the narrative is not solely its relationship to behaviour, however, but the power of its meaning making; if the story can be told to rationalize violence, then it can be told to support desistance.

Wacquant (2002) critiqued Anderson (1999) for framing the code as both a product of political economy and traditional masculine honour. As such, the remainder of this section reviews the literature on masculinity in Ireland. Irish studies have shown how conceptions of masculinity differ by geographical area, socio-economic status and gender, can fluctuate throughout the life course (Darcy 2019) and, are often negotiated and renegotiated during periods of economic change (Laoire 2005). Findings from this literature are broadly consistent with Anderson's (1999) framing of this form of marginalized masculinity (Connell 2005: 83).

Early research on masculinity in Ireland focused on rural regions and populations. Laoire (2005: 94) found farmers conceptions of masculinity tied to exerting control over nature, maintaining the family farm and providing for families, while the tough and physical nature of farming conferred prestige and status on men who viewed non-manual work as feminine. A more recent study framed rural masculinity as embodied: 'to join the ranks of "tough men" required that farmers' displayed the 'wear and tear' their bodies had endured as 'a badge of honour that embodied this masculine ideal' (Hammersley *et al.* 2021: 12). Darcy (2019: 18) has argued that, as a historically agricultural country, this conception of embodied physical labour, and providing for family, remains at the core of Irish masculinity and perpetuates 'a traditional construction of masculinity tempered by physicality'.

This physical embodiment of labour has traditionally been entwined with high levels of alcohol consumption (Darcy 2019; Windle *et al.* 2023). Darcy (2019: 28) frames alcohol consumption as a competition for status whereby those 'unable to maintain bodily control whilst intoxicated' are viewed as less masculine. A follow-up study found illicit drug use also provided opportunities to prove masculinity 'through displays of physical endurance and bodily control' and, ultimately, 'a demonstration of toughness' (Darcy 2020: 179).

While early research focused on the rural, two studies of inner-city Limerick (Hourigan 2011) and Dublin (Goodwin 2002) found masculinity tied to capacity to financially provide for family, through formal or informal avenues. Bairner (1999: 127) argued that 'the cult of the "hard man"' is 'central to the construction of Irish masculinities in working class communities in Northern Ireland'. Bairner (1999) drew from Sugden's (1996: 129) observation that hard-men 'stand up for themselves physically' and had worked in docks and factories with 'proud, physically tough' occupational cultures. Job losses from deindustrialization meant, however, that the 'status of todays "hard men" is measured in terms of their capacity to engage in boundless violence'. McAlister and colleagues (2009: 114) found that some young working-class men who adopted 'hard man' personas used violence to both prevent victimization and build status, because violence was 'closely associated with male identity'. Similarly, Hourigan's (2011) ethnography of inner-city Limerick identified the origins of the 'hard-man' culture in an historical distrust of official criminal justice institutions and, from the late-1960s, deindustrialization. The loss of valued working-class employment affected many individuals' self-respect, with some seeking to gain status through conspicuous consumption, including the consumption of licit and illicit substances, and/

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or developing reputations for violence. These studies collectively show how the long association of physicality and substance use with a valued masculinity can, when continued in the absence of opportunity to demonstrate masculinity through work, influence how some perform masculinity. The implications of this are discussed below.

Desistance

Research on desistance in Ireland is 'still in its infancy' (Healy 2017: 185) but the evidence-base is growing (see Cambridge *et al.* 2022; Coghlan 2026; Hart and Healy 2018; Healy 2017; Healy and O'Donnell 2008; Seaman and Lynch 2016; 2022). A core finding is that even the most prolific offenders drift into and out of offending (Matza 1964) and the desistance process often involves forward and backward steps, similar to the 'cessation/relapse processes identified in research on drug use' (Carlsson 2013b: 914). Both desistance from offending, and recovery from problematic substance use, are commonly identified as processes (Best 2016; Best *et al.* 2017; Cambridge *et al.* 2022; Marsh 2011) whereby individuals move away from offending/substance use, temporarily, for longer periods or more permanently (Maruna and Farrall 2004).

The overlap between desistance and recovery is, however, underexplored in the research literature (Van Roeyen *et al.* 2017). This study focuses on two important elements which support this process: hooks for change (Giordano *et al.* 2002) and redemption scripts (Maruna 2001). Both narrative-based theories revolve around processes whereby 'individuals stop identifying' themselves with negative labels 'and craft alternative identities' (Stone *et al.* 2018: 384). While this process of cognitive change has been identified by Carlsson (2013b) as overlapping with cognitive behavioural therapy, it may have more in common with compassion focused therapy (see Gilbert 2014). That is, processes of cognitive change often involve the development of self-compassion by reviewing the past to imagine a new self.

Giordano *et al.* (2002: 991) analysed life history narratives from 97 women and 83 men, who had been incarcerated, to identify how those who desisted experienced agentic 'cognitive shifts', involving the following four stages: they possessed a 'cognitive openness to change', identified an opportunity or 'hook for change', visualized an 'appealing' 'replacement self' and finally transformed how they viewed their past behaviour. The hook for change involves a narrative of what made the change process possible, and the identification of a pivotal moment when the individual changed from the 'old' to the 'new' self' and towards '*future* concerns' (Giordano *et al.* 2002: 1055 original italics). Sometimes the hook was obvious to the individual but other times identifying the hook took reflection. This process also involved a transformation in how the individual viewed their 'deviant behaviour or lifestyle' (Giordano *et al.* 2002: 1002). The theory has been used to explain transitions away from problematic substance use (Morgan and Bennett 2023; Stone 2016).

Maruna (2001) analysed the life stories of 65 people convicted of criminal offences, and found that the 30 who were desisting had formed a narrative which was redemptive. This 'redemption script' allowed them to forgive themselves by making sense of past behaviour through identifying causes of this behaviour. This allowed them to reinterpret their past in positive terms, which then allowed them to identify a change in identity from their false self (i.e. offending behaviour) to their true self. This was opposed to those who identified more nihilistic 'condemnation script'. Those participants struggled to desist as they felt powerless to change in the face of structural constraints and framed not desisting as a personal failing. The theory has been used to explain how individuals transition away from problematic substance use (Cambridge *et al.* 2022; Marsh 2011;

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Stone 2016, Stone *et al.* 2018). A test of redemption script theory in Ireland, by Healy and O'Donnell (2008), found that those in the early-stages of their desistance journey were more concerned with satisfying basic needs (i.e. finding employment or housing). These findings offered support for redemption scripts while arguing that basic needs must be met before narrative work can begin (Healy and O'Donnell 2008). This also raises the question of redemption scripts being retrospective framing devices in terms of desistance or recovery journeys.

As hooks for change and redemption scripts revolve around cognitive change, they could be viewed as individualistic psychological models. Both concepts, however, identify individuals as embedded within communities and that 'social experiences often serve as catalysts for these shifts in perspective, and later help to solidify or derail moves toward more prosocial pathways' (Giordano 2022: 791). Hooks for change and redemptions scripts, like the street code, involve interactions between individuals and their social contexts. For example, Anderson (1999), Maruna (2001) and Giordano *et al.* (2002) do not identify unemployment as directly causing violence or desistance from violence but recognize how unemployment may influence internal narratives and social identity (see Weaver 2019).

Several recent studies emphasize the need for desistance studies to move further beyond individualistic explanations by considering social relationships and, local structures and cultures (Bell *et al.* 2021; Fox 2015; Segeve 2020). Bell *et al.* (2021: 818) conducted an ethnography of two Northern Ireland neighbourhoods and found men drifting into offending partly because they lived in areas with a 'criminogenic subculture', founded upon poverty and social exclusion. These local subcultures influenced participants 'perception of the types of behaviour that are appropriate and acceptable within certain contexts'. While Bell *et al.* (2021) identify such environments as a potential barrier to desistance, Anderson (1999) reminds us that different subcultures can co-exist within a community, and different people navigate their community differently. For some individuals, desisting requires 'knifing-off' completely from their community (Maruna 2001) while others are unable to do this (Seaman and Lynch 2022) or find more pro-social members of their community as a replacement network (Cambridge *et al.* 2022). They may even become the 'old heads' (Anderson 1999), or 'wounded healers' (Maruna 2001), who can support others within their community in their own process of change (see Cambridge *et al.* 2022; Marsh 2011).

The literature reviewed in this section argues that desistance is one element in a social and embedded journey from offending to non-offending and, that desistance and recovery can be parallel, intertwined and even inseparable elements of this process. As such, this section emphasizes the importance of an eco-system approach to understanding desistance and recovery, incorporating cognition, identity, interpersonal dynamics, community, culture and economics. This framework informs the analysis that follows.

Method

This study draws upon a qualitative study conducted with participants primarily from the North Side of Cork City; an area of Ireland's second largest city which has long suffered among the highest level of economic deprivation and social exclusion in the country. The two most 'extremely disadvantaged' areas of the North Side had male unemployment rates of 37.21% and 43.48% in 2022 (Pobal 2022). Similar to Anderson's (1999) Philadelphia neighbourhood, the North Side was badly impacted by the loss of heavy industry in the 1980s and early-1990s, including the closure of the Ford assembly plant, Sunbeam Wolsey textile factory and Verolme dockyard (Brunt 1989; Cullinane 2020). This was followed by further job losses during the Great Recession, especially the downturn in the construction industry (Kelly and McGuinness 2015; Windle *et al.* 2023).

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The study employed modified grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) to analyse the life histories of 40 participants. Charmaz (2006) frames modified grounded theory as a set of principles and tools focused on appreciating participants processes while stressing the importance of action and meaning making. Ethical permission was granted from our Social Research Ethics Committee. Employing mixed purposeful and snowballing sampling (Boeri and Lamonica 2015), posters advertising the research were placed in three third-sector organizations that work with incarcerated people, pre- and post-release from prison. Snowballing was then employed to recruit further participants. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 35 individual, and one five person focus group. Interviews ceased when new participants were longer provided fresh data or theoretical insights (i.e. saturation) (Charmaz 2006).

The interviews extracted in-depth and contextualized life histories. This approach focused not on the description or recall of the individual's life experiences, but on the processes, interactivities, interpersonal relationships and developmental context to their life events. The interviewer came prepared with just one questions: 'Could you start by telling me what life was like growing up for you?'. All subsequent questions were reactions led by participants life-history narratives. As such, participants told us what mattered to them. Participants were not explicitly asked about the street code, but most participants spoke of the importance of performing masculinity.

Participants were aged between 21 and 49 years old. All were male and most lived in the North Side. All had been addicted (self-defined) to alcohol and/or drugs, and had at least 1 year of abstinence from drugs and/or alcohol at the time of interview. All had engaged with the criminal justice system and had received at least one conviction. Several had multiple convictions and had served multiple custodial sentences. All had engaged with outpatient addiction services, just over half had attended residential addiction treatment centres and many had attended 12-step meetings. While the type of substance consumed varied, poly-drug use was common with many reporting some combination of alcohol, benzodiazepines and/or heroin.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and identifying information removed. Transcribed interviews were first coded by line coding (by hand). The data were then entered into Nvivo and line-by-line codes were entered into Nvivo 'nodes'. Once the line-by-line coding was complete the data was analysed by putting them into higher order themes. This axial coding process relates categories to subcategories (Strauss 1987: 64). From the 2,461 initial codes that emerged from the line-by-line coding, the axial coding led to 249 sets. Further contrasting, comparison and coding narrowed these sets down to 141 and eventually 27 interrelated final higher order themes (Charmaz 2006). Full results are reported by Cambridge et al. (2022).

Insider-research

Data were collected by Graham Cambridge, who is an insider-researcher. At the time of interviews, he was employed in a probation funded initiative to support people trying to desist from offending, recover from addiction and reintegrate after prison. He had also grown-up, and still lived, in the North Side of the city. Many participants knew Graham, or knew of Graham, before the research commenced. Bourgois (1995: 12) has argued that working-class people who use drugs often distrust academics, so can be warry of revealing 'intimate experiences of drug abuse'. Insider-researchers can lessen trust deficits (Leonard and Windle 2020) and recognize slang, jokes, gestures and possible fabrications (Chavez 2008). Indeed, one interviewee was excluded from the analysis because Graham, drawing on local knowledge, suspected responses were fictitious. Graham's biography and cultural

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capital were essential to the data collection process, both in terms of gaining access and developing the trust of participants, but also in the production of meaningful and sensitive analysis of lived experiences (Ellis *et al.* 2023).

Limitations

Most participants had undergone extensive therapy and counselling during the recovery process, so may have ruminated more than those currently engaged in active offending or substance use, and often came to interviews with redemption scripts. Many were active members of 12-step meetings where they would have re-told their story multiple times (see Marsh 2011). As such, interviewing those currently in active addiction, or in earlier stages of recovery, may have generated different responses.

Participants can, and do, fabricate elements of their story (Elffers 2010). Some may have talked street in the interview more than they acted street (Jimerson and Oware 2006). The narrative may, however, be more important than reality for desistance and fabrications can be informative for researchers (Sandberg 2010). This said, Graham's position as an insider researcher allowed him to identity those participants who exaggerated their capacity for violence, involvement in street life or substance use (see Ellis *et al.* 2023). It is also possible, however, that the presence of an interviewer who had 'lived street' and now worked for probation could have influenced how participants presented their narratives.

This study was also concerned with individuals who defined themselves as actively addicted to licit or illicit substances, led the most chaotic lives and had been incarcerated. They are not representative of all people who use substances problematically in Cork City, let alone Ireland. Indeed, Anderson (1999) identities two ideal types within communities—those who use the code and those who are used by the code. The participants in this study sat within the second idea-type. A more pressing concern is that all participants were male. This remains a limitation of the wider desistance and rehabilitation literature (Seaman and Lynch 2022; Windle and Cronin 2025) and, while women must also navigate street codes (Anderson 1999), this is seldom explored in the literature (Fader and León 2024). Further research is needed on how women navigate street cultures in Ireland, and experience desistance and recovery processes.

Some researchers have argued that insider-researchers are 'inherently biased, and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions' (Merriam *et al.* 2001: 411). Biases were reflected upon in supervision meetings and, during co-writing and analysis. This said, reflexive qualitative researchers increasingly identify subjectivity and bias as 'something valuable, rather than problematic'. That 'all knowledge' is 'inescapably shaped by processes and practices of knowledge production, including the practices of the researcher' (Clarke and Braun 2021: 12; Ellis *et al.* 2023).

Results

The performative element of the street code was central to all participant accounts. All articulated the importance of being *seen* to conduct themselves in ways which communicated the form of masculinity they felt was valued by their peer group and wider community. Participants described this as being a 'hard-man', which Hourigan (2011) found in Limerick to share features with the street code.

Most of the 40 participants had left school early with minimal qualifications. Some had never held legitimate employment, others had been employed sporadically in manual labour. As observed by Anderson (1999), and other studies (Bourgois 1995; Downes 1966; Ellis 2015; Hourigan 2011; McAlister *et al.* 2009; Sugden 1996; Winlow 2001), being denied opportunities to accumulate the status afforded by legitimate employment and education

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meant participants viewed being a hard-man as the only available means to achieve status and respect within their community:

> You were respected if you fought, you were not respected if you could debate. You were not respected because you were intelligent. You were respected if you were not afraid to fight. You did not need to be a good fighter, once you were willing to go into a fight in the first place (P15).

> The only people that seemed to be respected and talked about the whole time were people that could handle themselves and the people that were involved in things, the madder the better (P21).

Participants described craving this hard-man status from a young age, and campaigning for it through the strategic use of violence. Some framed this as a means of gaining some control and respect in chaotic environments:

> I felt the bravado, and I thought it was a great thing and I thought that people would have been looking at me differently (P9).

> To have power over people, to have people afraid of you, to have them do anything for you that was my idea as power (P26).

> I was asked one day when I was a kid, "would you prefer if someone loved you or feared you". I said fear me, because you had control over them (P20).

> If I went out and shot someone, or done something tomorrow, they would be back there treating me nicer (P34).

Learning the code, craving hard-man status

Aligning with the street code (Anderson 1999), participants all reported learning the need to retaliate and avoid showing signs of weakness as young children (also McAlister *et al.* 2009). This was something both socialized in the home, and learned from experience on the street.

> When I was a kid and my mam would send me to the shop, I would get robbed eight times out of 10. So I started fighting from a young age (P34).

> I learned how to adjust quick. How this place operates, how you have to be, how to stand up for yourself. That was my mentality growing up. If people in the area seen you as weak target they would intimidate you. For me, I had to make a name and quick (P37).

Some participants' parents 'code switched' (Anderson 1999). They generally disagreed with violence, yet recognized the reality of the area and actively prepared their children to navigate violence and exploitation:

> My mother and father were lovely people, they raised us right…but [I knew] that if I pulled away from it [the hard-man identity], they would turn on me because I would have *got soft*. It was all bravado, who is hard, fuck the guards [police], fuck the law, fuck authority (P39).

> At home we always were into boxing … He [participant's father] would have told me to stand up for myself in school. If you got into a fight even at a young age they would ask you who won the fight (P16).

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Maintaining hard-men status

Generating and maintaining status required a willingness and capacity for confrontation, regardless of the opponents' reputation and aptitude for violence (Anderson 1999). Indeed, showing no fear was more important than winning the fight as fear could dissolve accumulated respect while aggression could generate respect, even when the confrontation ended in injury:

> We got respect and we were left alone. That was the key - we were left alone. For us then we could walk through [the estate] and the hard fellas were up in the corner. A lot of people [had to] go around the long way … we could go straight on because [of] what we done and we were fearless, even though they would test us, by calling us a langer, a prick. You would have to stand up to them. And many a time I would have got a clatter, a beating, but I stood up again and got more respect for it (P39).

Being injured in a fight, or incarcerated, became important symbols of masculinity and helped build hard-man status:

> You were [seen as] tougher because you were stabbed (P15).

> They would look up to you, when you get out first [of prison], you'd have celebrity status (P27).

Violent confrontations were seen as both essential to status building and a strategy for self-protection. Participants felt that they risked being violently victimized or exploited if they could not maintain credible threats of violence (see Anderson 1999). As those perceived as weak were vulnerable to victimization and exploitation, participants worked hard to avoid generating a reputation for weakness (also Hourigan 2011; Topalli *et al.* 2002; Windle and Briggs 2015). P9 identified violence, and heavy substance use, as a 'survival skill' as those who failed to gain respect from their peers were dominated and exploited by others. As P15 says below, avoiding victimization required knowing the 'street rules':

> It's all image and front and you have this wall in front of you, where no one sees you as weak, and it is all street talk, and street attitude, and *street rules*, it is very similar, coming from the area (P15).

Strategies to avoid being seen as weak, and thus victimized, revolved around performative displays of violence and avoiding all behaviour perceived as weak. This ranged from not crying to not cooperating with the Gardaí (Irish police). P31's quote highlights how many were motivated to maintain a level of respect they felt was missing when they were younger:

> You would lose your place in society [for collaborating with the Gardaí]. People would treat me like shit again (P31).

Once achieved, their status had to be constantly defended. Participants recalled how, as they campaigned for hard-man status, they would seek conflicts with older men with violent reputations and try to steal their respect to increase their own respect. Then, once they had gained sufficient status, others did the same to them: 'I had a name and a reputation, so fellas were fighting with me for their reputations' (P21).

As did Anderson (1999), the men framed hard-man status as a commodity to be lost, stolen or accumulated. This dynamic resulted in a constant struggle to seek or maintain hard-man status through violence and aggression, even when they wanted to avoid violence. For example, P21's home was attacked in a shooting and he was torn between

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needing to maintain hard-man status and, avoiding arrest and conflict with his family. The drive to maintain his hard-man status won. Like Goffman's (1967) observation that we all have front and backstage personas, P21 recalled:

> I would be crying upstairs, tough man down-stairs. Upstairs I was crying knowing what I was doing was wrong. I could not separate myself, *reputation was more important* (P21).

Intoxication and the street code

So far, the men's narratives aligned with Anderson's (1999) description of the street code, which has been framed in Ireland as a 'hard-man' identity (Hourigan 2011; McAlister *et al.* 2009; see Bairner 1999; Sugden 1996). Where our participants narratives diverge from Anderson's conceptualization of the street code is the emphasize they placed on intoxication. Excessive consumption of alcohol, pharmaceutical drugs and/or currently illicit drugs were important for all participants as a means of status building (also Carlsson 2013*a*; 2013*b*; Darcy 2019; Dolan 2011; Dwyer 2014; Peralta 2007) and social bonding (also Ayres and Treadwell 2012; Ilan 2013). Willingness to be intoxicated, but in control, was as important as willingness to fight:

> I felt like a man holding a can and drinking naggin [200 ml bottle] of vodka, it made me feel good, I could hold my drink (P8).

> I thought all that macho, trouble, drinking … I never matured from the day I took a drink at 15. That macho persona came onto me (P39).

Some participant identified how intoxication provided 'Dutch courage' by making them feel more confident and able to engage in other behaviours needed to generate hard-men identities (also Ayres and Treadwell 2012). Participants also enjoyed the reputation they secured from things they did while intoxicated:

> With that I started to get confidence. Started getting a reputation for the things I was doing on drink and drugs, robbing cars, houses (P31).

Another participant reflected on his role models when he was young and highlighted the interplay between heavy substance use and violence:

> He was my idol growing up. He was a womanizer a heavy alcoholer, just tough man … He was someone I aspired to be (P30).

P30 identified how he, and others in his community, aspired to be a hard-man from a young age, and identified problematic substance use as an element in this identity. Other studies have, however, shown that simply consuming substances is insufficient to confer masculine status in Ireland–individuals must also exhibit capacity to consume intoxicants without becoming so intoxicated that they lose physically (Darcy 2019; 2020; Sugden 1996). That is, both violence and substance use are embodied, and provide opportunities to exhibit control and strength.

Loss of physicality and identity change

An element of the street code that Anderson (1999) did not report, but was reported by many of our participants, is that maintaining hard-man status was physically and emotionally exhausting. Some felt burnt-out by prolonged problematic substance use and violent

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confrontations. It was also, however, a lifestyle they had been socialized into and could not see past. For these participants, recovery from addiction and desistance from offending required reflecting upon, and drastically changing, routine elements of their daily lives, their sense of self and place within their community. Most 'knifed off' from people during the process (see Best 2016; Maruna 2001). This process of change made them very vulnerable. Creating and sustaining the hard-man image caused participants harm but was also a functional means of coping and surviving they had learned as young children. P9 reflected that he, and others, became 'vulnerable' during the recovery process as they were 'left on their own' as the 'macho element' they had long cultivated dissipated. Many feared being unable to survive if therapy took away their capacity for violence. Letting go of this identity was, therefore, both difficult and essential to recovery.

Recovery from problematic substance use and desistance from crime often involves an identity shift (Best 2016; Marsh 2011; Maruna 2001; Stone 2016). For the men, this process had begun before they chose to distance themselves from substance use and violence. They had all been problematically consuming licit and illicit substances for long periods, and all later self-identified as addicted to one or more substance. Substance use begun depleting their physicality and they began finding it increasingly difficult to defend themselves, let alone be aggressors. Irish studies have shown how masculinity is embodied, with even more traditional forms of masculinity emphasizing capacity to engage in physical work (Laoire 2005) and avoid losing control of the body while intoxicated (Darcy 2019). Consequently, for the men in this study, their hard fought for hard-man status was being depleted, and they began to develop stigmatized reputations as 'addicts' (see Radcliffe and Stevens 2008) whose loss of control and physicality was viewed as weak (see Peralta 2007) compared to the hard-man who can exert control over his body, and the body of others. The behaviours the men had prioritized, for survival and to generate status, were now causing harm to that which they most valued:

> My identity was become more of a drunken fool than anything else. That womanizer, tough man that could earn a living, was gone (P30).

> I can remember getting into a fight and being knocked to the floor and everything, and you would be saying this should not be happening to me (P8).

> I was falling around the place … I ended up going from being respected around the place, to people saying for fuck sake here [he] is again (P39).

Participants often begun using more substances to soothe the ever-increasing emotional pain of losing their hard-man status, alongside the anxiety and depression associated with heavy substance use. Graham asked two men what not being a proficient fighter meant. They replied:

> My self-esteem would have been very low because of it, because I feel like, that's the area, that's the environment that I grow up in (P21).

> I could not keep up the front anymore. I was bait [worn down] from the alcohol and the drugs at the time (P16).

Some spoke of how things got worse during relapses. For example, P16 reported how, after relapsing, he would be:

> … back fighting and drink driving, back getting into car crashes. Now things were getting worse, the fights were more frequent and violent (P16).

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This often caused a further deterioration in physical and mental health.

The loss of physicality, hard-man status and associated respect, triggered an existential crisis which threatened the men's sense of self (Farrall and Calverley 2005), forced them to confront a possible future as someone viewed as weak (Farrall 2005) and made them vulnerable to further victimization. This was the 'hook for change' (Giordano *et al.* 2002) in which they begun reassessing their own identity (Farrall and Calverley 2005). Even if this realization was not always immediately obvious to the men.

All participants eventually entered the recovery process, often involving some combination of residential, community and prison-based services. During this process most identified how their interpretation of masculinity, including the meaning of strong/weak, was a barrier to rehabilitation. The interlinked recovery and desistance processes ultimately involved reconfiguring how they defined masculinity and what it was to be a man (also Carlsson 2013a; Dwyer 2014). Many found the early stage of the process challenging, and painful (see Coghlan 2026; Dennehy and Brierley 2026; Nugent and Schinkel 2016). They had all used substances and violence to soothe and suppress emotions, and build status, and during recovery they felt overwhelmed by past traumas, and guilt, and had to relinquish the status they had strived for from childhood:

> My mind is stuck in limbo. I am very depressed, it's like I failed at that, it's like you are being born again (P34).
>
> What did you fail at? (Graham).
>
> It's not that I failed, your ideas of the whole way you grow up, is wrong, now you have to be reborn into this other life. You know nothing really about it, it's like you are 30 years of age, and it's like where the fuck are you (P34).

P9 reflected on feeling afraid of losing the 'macho element' that was both 'a survival skill' and 'who I am'.

The hook for change was, therefore, there in their losses (see Farrall 2005). The loss of physicality, the loss of standing 'like a man', the loss of fights and the loss of respect on the street motivated the men to enter into, and engage with, treatment. The process between this realization and recovery was often a long road (see Best 2016; Farrall 2005). Some had not realized the extent to which they had prioritized their hard-man status until they tried to distance themselves from their old identity and behaviours, and found the process difficult:

> I did not realize how much I liked it, the bravado thing, till I came out of it (P9).
>
> I still have that persona around me, still have the loudmouth, fuck this fella, I don't give a fuck about that fella. Still had that attitude, or talk. I still would have the macho talk without the drink … it was everything. It was survival. It was the most important thing in my life. It was hard to let it go. It was hard to understand to let it go (P39).

Others felt they needed to maintain elements of their hard-man image to avoid being victimized or exploited. Indeed, P31 felt 'afraid' to let it go altogether because, while harmful, it had served a function:

> It's gone to an extent in that I am not out there throwing my weight around. But I would like to think I can keep onto some bit for some day that I might need it, when someone tries' it on with me again. I would like to think it's there to mind me … not to make myself

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> look bigger, for any bad reason … These things have kept bullies and people who wanted to get at me at bay, they kept me alive. I would be afraid to let it go, if I let it go someone might harm me, like the way I was when I was a child (P31).

Other participants, however, felt the need to detach from the hard-man image completely as it obstructed the vulnerability and positive communication needed in therapeutic recovery, and felt that violence could draw them back into active addiction:

> Going back to old ways going around with old people … it is the way they be talking, the lingo, it will take you right back there like, using again (P8).

This hook for change motivated several participants to attend treatment. Most of the men then slowly began, sometimes over several years and several relapses, to understand the need to change their behaviour and their identity. For example, P8 had been in recovery for several years, was abstaining from alcohol and drugs, and avoiding behaviours and situations which might trigger a relapse. He experienced the strain of a 'negatively valued stimuli' (Agnew 1992: 47) when a family member was attacked in an ongoing feud. He was distressed by the idea that people perceived him as weak for not retaliating but also understood that retaliation could trigger a relapse.

Detaching from performing this type of masculinity is a long and difficult journey, especially in the painful liminal stage of recovery (Coghlan 2026). Many participants reported mourning the loss of a self and respect they valued and, was valued by family members, old friends and many within their community:

> You would not feel anything; you would not feel man enough. All that left straight away, all that was gone out of me. I felt worthless (P26).

This said, some reported feeling relieved at shedding their hard-man status and acknowledged that further violence would cause them to suffer. For example, P39 initially felt sad at losing a status that was 'the most important thing in my life' but came to realize that 'I am the one who suffers mentally and emotionally' from acts of violence (P39). Such feelings of relief, however, often only came after much introspection, therapy and time. The distance between the hook (loss of physicality) and recovery was often great. As Giordano *et al.* (2002) identified, hooks for change are part of a wider process. Indeed, the sense of relief some identified may point to the acceptance of a redemption script whereby they had begun to find their true selves.

Towards redemption scripts

Letting go of the hard-man status allowed the men to construct redemptive scripts (Maruna 2001) which externalized the cause of their violent behaviour and substance use to local subcultures and structural constraints, including childhood and adult traumas, poverty and educational disadvantage (see Cambridge *et al.* 2022) and they reframed their internal narratives towards one stressing how they had survived difficult situations rather than being bad people (Maruna 2001). They were able to '"mine" their past experiences for evidence of moral agency and recast negative experiences as redemptive suffering' (Stone 2016: 957). Compassionately reflecting on their histories and building new narratives allowed them to progress into their 'true self', as a good person:

> It was all a front, it was not the true me. That macho, the way I spoke, the way [I] acted, the way I portrayed myself, the way I walk was a phony person. It was fake (P39).

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> I was a nice person, but my intentions were all wrong … I never matured from the day I took a drink (P39).

> I think it was easy for me to let go of that hard-man image because it was all a front. I was never really a violent person (P32).

Some reflected on how they were not naturally violent, and had disliked violence, but had *needed* to communicate to others that they were willing to use violence because of the local environment:

> I never saw myself as a handy or a hard-man, but … I tried to give off that impression, so you would not be seen as weak (P15).

Indeed, a number of participants framed being a hard-man as a 'front'. According to P15, the hard-man image was a 'wall in front of you', behind which hid a true self which could be vulnerable and did not always need to be 'strong'. Several came to identify the hard-man image as a barrier to the reflection needed for recovery:

> When you're trying to live up to this macho image it is hard, you are not letting people into what is really going on what is inside your head (P9).

Again this took time and reflection, and often peer support, to identify (see Best 2016; Marsh 2011). Maruna (2001: 87) found that many of those who desisted felt empowered by someone who 'believed in them'. The men in this study often found empowerment, and support, from peers attending 12-step meetings or similar programmes (Cambridge *et al.* 2022). Many of the men were only able to narrate these redemption scripts—of being inherently good people, who had done some bad things because they had survived much hardship, and were now presenting their good true self–because they had lost that which they coveted: the hard-man reputation. Furthermore, both the street code (Anderson 1999) and condemnation scripts (Maruna 2001) are inherently nihilistic, and the men in this study had begun to frame their world in more optimistic terms. In short, the loss of hard-man status provided a hook which nudged the men into therapy and recovery, whereby they were able to create new narratives which facilitated their progress through their recovery and desistance.

Discussion

The 40 men interviewed for this study had all been socialized from a young age into what Anderson (1999) called the street code, and is referred to as being a hard-man in Ireland (Bairner 1999; Hourigan 2011; McAlister *et al.* 2009; Sugden 1996). They had all coveted the status of the hard-man, and feared being labelled as weak. This was partly about internal feelings of respect, a scarce commodity within economically impoverished communities, and partly to deter victimization.

They had learned from a young age to portray aggression and violence, and retaliate against any perceived disrespect, and that failure to be aggressive would result in victimization. As such, they engaged in behaviours which could build reputations for violence and generate respect. Heavy substance use was an integral element of generating respect and forming their status as harm-men. Once achieved they needed to maintain their hard-won status through performative displays of violence and heavy substance use. This also served to sooth and calm the emotional and physical pain of past and current traumas (Cambridge *et al.* 2022; Leonard and Windle 2020).

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Participants all eventually succumbed to active addiction. While substance use had been key to building status, it later robbed them of the key asset needed for this reputation–physicality. While capacity for violence is at the heart of the street code (Anderson 1999), much Irish research has emphasized the embodied nature of masculinity. That is, being a man requires capacity to control one's body, or the body of others, whether through work (Hammersley *et al.* 2021; Sugden 1996), violence (Hourigan 2011; McAlister *et al.* 2009; Sugden 1996) or consumption of licit or illicit substances (Darcy 2019, 2020). Participants begun feeling weak and vulnerable to attack. They no long longer felt respected and, had lost the hard-man status they had craved since childhood and valued above all else. This loss sparked a painful existential crisis (Farrall 2005).

The academic literature identifies the street code as an inherently negative, maladaptive and nihilistic, response to multiple structural inequalities (Fader and León 2024). It was this for the men in this study, but later represented a 'hook for change' (Giordano *et al.* 2002) which directed them towards recovery. This was not, however, an easy road. The men had worked hard to create, and maintain, hard-man status. This loss of status not only triggered an existential crises (Farrall 2005), and caused emotional pain (Coghlan 2026; Dennehy and Brierley 2026; Nugent and Schinkel 2016), but opened them to victimization from past victims seeking retaliation and those trying to accumulate respect through violence. Many of the men identified this loss of physicality, and loss of respect, as the point when they understood that something had to change. This existential loss of a valued status (Farrall 2005) was the men's hook for change (Giordano *et al.* 2002).

During the recovery process the men begun understanding the structural causes of their desperate need for hard-man status, often with the support of peers. This provided the elements to compose redemption scripts (Maruna 2001) upon which they built their desistance from crime and recovery from addiction. They could formulate a story reframing themselves as inherently good people who had done harmful things to survive tough environments. Through much therapy and introspection, and often with the support of peers, they let go of the inherently nihilistic street code and transitioned into a new conception of masculinity. This was, however, often a long, difficult, lonely and painful processes. Not only did the formulation of redemption scripts force participants to reflect upon the traumatic pasts which had been soothed by substances but they felt the 'abyss of uncertainty' and 'seething insecurity' (Dennehy and Brierley 2026: 8) of losing a status that had been 'the most important thing in my life' (P39), or 'who I am' (P9), while trying to forge new identities seemingly at odds with local subcultures which had valued violence and heavy substance use. The process of forming redemption scripts helped the men identify new versions of themselves, which were not dependent on violence or substance use and were more positive about the future.

Conclusion

Understanding how the street code operates can help practitioners, whether probation or addiction councillors, to use that which has caused harm to help people live less harmful lives. The street code can be a hook to kill the street code, and form new manifestations of masculinity. It can be another tool to identify why individuals have behaved as they did and support the redemption scripts which support change.

As being a hard-man can keep people somewhat safer in unsafe environments, changing the narrative can be insufficient. Carlsson (2013b) has shown how the most excluded, and stigmatized, find capitalizing on hooks for change the most difficult. Healy and O'Donnell (2008) found that it can be difficult to work on identity change without secure housing or

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nourishing food. Schinkel (2015) similarly argued that people need reasons to maintain positive change. The men in this study all came from one of Irelands poorest areas and had all experienced multiple childhood and adult traumas. Decades of research show how forms of violent masculinity are born of poverty, joblessness, discrimination, trauma and social exclusion. Men often search for respect through violence when legitimate avenues for respect are obstructed (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995; Downes 1966; Hourigan 2011; Sugden 1996; Winlow 2001). As such, while loss of physicality can represent a hook for change, and therapy can support redemption scripts, this process must be supported by a reconnection to more positive social networks alongside access to material supports.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to report.

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https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azag077
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