

CRIMVOL: The International Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Research Network

Second CRIMVOL virtual working
paper session: *9th July 2020*



CRIMVOL
CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

Ruwani Fernando

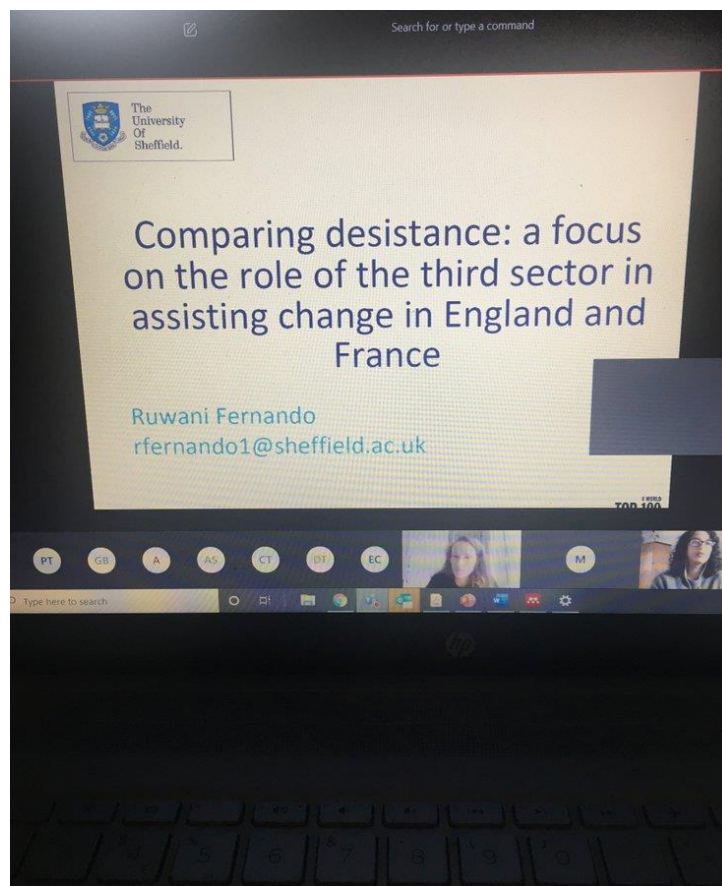
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About CRIMVOL: The International Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Research Network

[CRIMVOL](#) is an international, multidisciplinary criminal justice voluntary sector research network for academics, practitioners, and policymakers. The network fills an important gap in scholarship and infrastructure: the criminal justice voluntary sector is more topical than ever before, but has not received academic attention commensurate with its importance anywhere in the world. The network is chaired by [Dr Philippa Tomczak](#) (Senior Research Fellow, University of Nottingham, Author of *The Penal Voluntary Sector*). CRIMVOL was established with the generous support of the British Academy (Rising Star Engagement Award) and the Socio-Legal Studies Association (Seminar Competition). A core focus is the development of [specialist early career researchers](#) and scholar-activist work.

Second 'virtual' working paper session

The International Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Research Network (CRIMVOL) hosted their second virtual event on Thursday 9th July 2020, with a presentation from [Ruwani Fernando](#) (University of Sheffield).



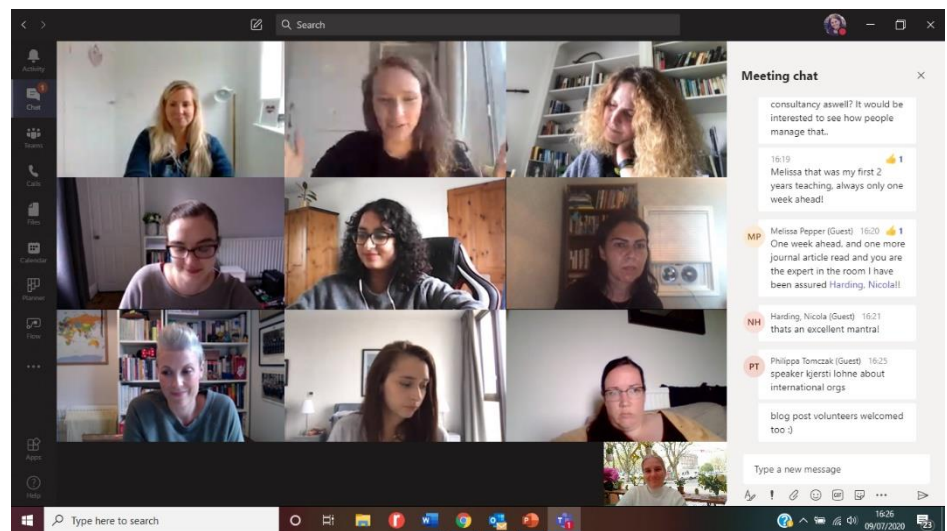
The role of the third sector in desistance journeys: a comparative perspective

I presented a paper entitled '*Comparing desistance: the role of the third sector in assisting change in England and France*' at the second virtual CRIMVOL working paper session on the 9th of July. Giving this talk to members of CRIMVOL was valuable for the feedback and comments I received, especially considering this was the first time I presented any findings from my thesis. Having fresh insight into my work allowed me to consider my findings through different perspectives and I am grateful for this opportunity and for being part of a wonderful, constructive community!

This paper draws from my PhD research, which is a cross-national comparison of processes of desistance in England and France. My research design includes interviewing people supervised on probation who have expressed a will to change and stop offending. The aim is to

explore differences and similarities in journeys out of crime according each national context, and this talk focused specifically on the role of the third sector in people's experiences out of crime. I analysed the type of organisations people engaged with and what they gained out of this involvement. In this paper, I sought to address the following question: what role do voluntary organisations play in processes of change? How does this compare in England and France?

A striking result in the data was the difference between the countries in the proportion of participants having gotten involved with volunteer organisations to begin with. Of the overall 42 participants interviewed for the thesis, 18 have reported involvement with a charity, of which only four are English participants. In this paper, I reflected on possible explanations for this. The locations of the samples partly explains this difference between the groups. Data from France was gathered in Paris, a capital city of over 2 million people, whereas data from England was gathered in Sheffield, which has nearly 700,000 people. Furthermore, the organisation of the third sector in France is decentralised and much more fragmented than in England and Wales, which may explain greater accessibility to charity organisations.



Beyond this difference, the English organisations mentioned included mostly charities focused on well-being and moral support. Having a platform for self-expression and the availability of peer support were valued and recurrent in the English data. In comparison, all French participants have mentioned getting practical support from charity organisations, including housing, employment, and administrative assistance. Contrasting with English participants who tend to value cognitive changes from their involvement with charities by mentioning personality changes, French participants value pragmatic, practical support in improving their social situations.

What does this difference in involvement with voluntary organisations mean then in terms of desistance from crime? French participants report having gained social capital in the form of interpersonal and administrative skills that they did not previously have. Help from charities brought stability, in turn allowing people to develop autonomy. Beyond practical support, voluntary organisations have the scope for instilling skills useful for desistance, life skills that are not necessarily technical, but important for employability and social inclusion. Previous research has highlighted the importance of strong social bonds in processes of desistance, and in the case of the French sample, volunteer organisations provide the tools to strengthen social inclusion through stability and autonomy. The results from the English data shed light on earlier findings on the internal mechanisms of desistance, considering personal dynamics and the role of cognition in change. Particularly, the skills earned from involvement with voluntary organisations pertain to coping strategies. Changes in the way people think and react to external circumstances have been more prominent in the English narratives.

These findings also suggest that the literature and theories on desistance might not necessarily apply to the French context and highlights the importance of research in different contexts, to understand the intricacies of processes of individual change. Institutional support from voluntary organisations illustrate respective criminal justice philosophies and perspectives: the inclusion of a desistance approach in England with considerations for personal, cognitive dynamics, while in France the aspect of social change was given greater attention. The interplay between the social, structural contexts of desistance and the subjective aspects of the process is not universal, and more needs to be done – especially on the French side – to understand journeys out of crime and how the third sector can facilitate change.

The third virtual CRIMVOL working paper session will take place on 3rd September, with a presentation from [Dr Kjersti Lohne](#) (University of Oslo, Norway), followed by a members' choice of ECR career development discussion topic.